WESTERN ACTION

NOV. 25¢

32 MORE PAGES

COFFIN FOR BUCK McKEE
by Lee Floren

BADLANDS
FEATURE NOVEL
by Del Rayburn

SILENT KILLER
FEATURE NOVELET
by Cliff Campbell

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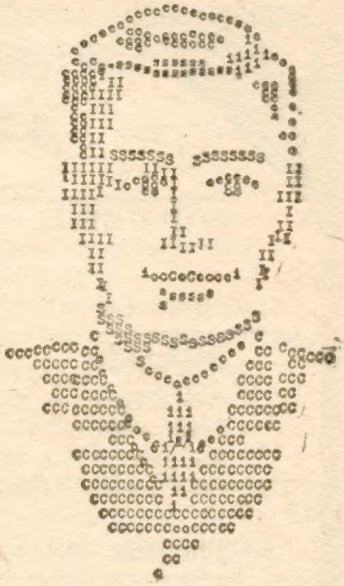

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VOLUME 15 NOVEMBER, 1950 NUMBER 2

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Suspenseful Novelet

SILENT KILLER ..... Cliff Campbell 92

There seemed to be no reason behind the murders, except that someone was on a killing-spree!

Three Top-Hand Short Stories

COFFIN FOR BUCK McKEE ..... Lee Floren 82

When Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe were held upon by a girl bandit, they found there was more at stake than their injured feelings...

PLAY IT SMART, LAWDOG! ..... W. F. Reynolds 113

Clay Bolton didn't like what he was about to do, but the time had come to make his law-badge pay something more than lead.

ABLE CAIN'S PLAGUE ..... A. A. Baker 120

Judge Able Cain's remedy for Bob Benson's skullduggery seemed to be worse than the trouble at hand.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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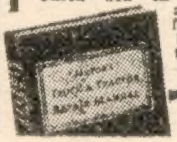

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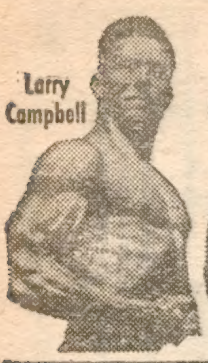
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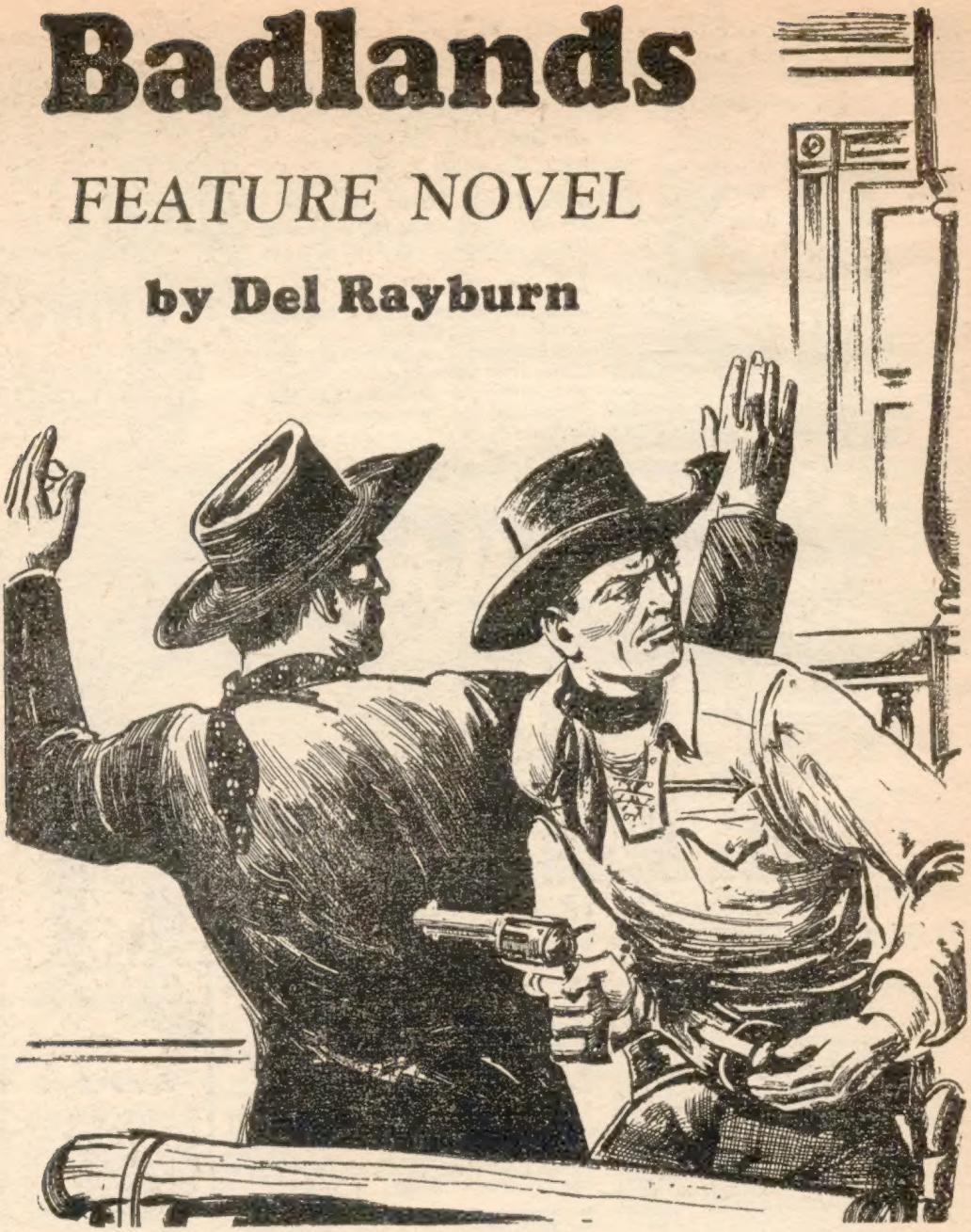
Badlands

FEATURE NOVEL

by Del Rayburn



"I have arrested this man for murder and I'm returning him to Texas for trial," Clay told Beth McCurdy and the sullen townspeople.

Gene Hunter considered himself the big wheel in McCurdy, but to Ranger Steve Clay, Hunter was the hunted. For Clay meant to bring Hunter back to Texas, one way or another. But Beth McCurdy was the real power in town, and Beth swore that the town had its own law and order; no outside help was needed. And with rival lobo outfits struggling for supremacy in the territory, this meant gun-trouble aplenty, with Clay getting it from all sides!

HE RODE with the unhurried patience of the trail-wise, crossing a land of grassed buttes and sweeping valleys that reached onward, always changing, to a rugged skyline which receded ever northward. He camped where the shadows of evening surrounded him, and made his small fire. In this still untamed Montana Territory, this spring of '81, one small indiscretion could cost a lone white man his hair. And before sleep came, he lay in his hidden bed listening to the small sounds which came from the darkness all about him.

One day the trail that had carried him all the way up from Texas climbed another high place and in the haze-filled distance northward appeared the sterile, trackless badlands of the Missouri. There was a strangeness about this view that stopped him and sent its prickly call

into the hidden place where sleep man's ancient instincts; a wary alertness struck through him. He smiled a wry, tight smile and let his horse move on.

Evening was again rising from the shadowed low places when he came to the edge of the river breaks. Below, on a bench above the Missouri, lay the small town which backtrail talk said would be McCurdy. Its double row of buildings transformed the trail into a street as it kept on toward the ferry-slip and steamer landing at the river. He whistled his bed-horse back from hungry grazing and went down the slope.

Beyond the cottonwood grove at its foot, he came to the head of the street and kept on before the double row of assorted cabins and houses squatted on either side. Small, roughly framed shops and stores took up the march where the cabins and houses quit it, rising abruptly to the two-storied false front of a saloon on the left, which seemed determined to equal the height of the mercantile and hotel facing it from the right. Beyond, a river road crossed the inbound trail, forming an intersection: below was a system of corrals and freight yards, on one side, with the appearance of dilapidation and decay about them. A weathered stage station stood across the street and there was an atmosphere of life about its corrals and barns; then his eye caught the Livery Stable sign, eastward along the intersecting River Street. He rode that way.

A man sat in a barrel chair tilted back against the stable front and Steve Clay felt the sharp inspection of the fellow's eyes as he reined up before the broad doorway.

"Fourth stall back on the right," the barn man said, not stirring. He was no older than Clay, but even in the failing light there was a dark smoothness about his sharp-nosed face and a look of wisdom.

"Is this McCurdy?"

The stableman nodded. "Right."

Clay looked down at him from the saddle and waited for any other information he might volunteer; when the fellow remained satisfied with his answer, Clay inquired, "Do you have a corral?"

Again the fellow nodded. "Sure. Same ante. Help yourself."

Clay stepped down with a rider's looseness about him, his heavy shape flat and angular with the litheness of one who has lived by rope and saddle. His features were strong and the sun's layers of tan spread smoothly over them. The silver cartwheel-rowels of his spurs made tiny music as his bootheels touched the ground. He unlashed the pack from his bed-horse, loosening the rope with practised motions. He dropped it before the saddleroom door, off-saddled, then led the pair on through the barn to the water-trough in the corral at the rear.

THE RAPID drumming of flying hoofs ran across the evening from somewhere outside town, and grew louder. Without giving it conscious attention, Clay was aware of this sound while he stood watching his horses roll in the corral dirt, after their drink: working dust into sweat-gummed hair to relieve the itchy places of their backs. Then there was the hard scrape of hoofs as a horse was dragged up sharp on the street outside the livery doorway. The murmur of a woman's voice came to Clay and after it a sharp word of protest or exclamation from the stableman.

When he had put the horses into one of the small pens along the east side of the corral, Clay went back to the front of the barn. He came out of the saddleroom, after stowing his outfit, and found a girl watching from outside the driveway door; her eyes met his with veiled hostility.

Her hair fell in long natural curls below an old range hat and was so lustrously black it seemed newly washed. Her skin had an olive smoothness that made it appear fresh and soft, but there was no weakness in her features and her small nose had a Roman-look of will about it. She wore a boy's checkered wool shirt, faded from much wear and washing. Her skirt was divided for

Elva Kimbrough had held off raiders before . . .

riding and made of handworked buckskin.

"Is the hostler around?" she asked Clay.

"He will be back in a minute." Clay liked the throaty mellowness of her voice, but knew, by her tone, that she did not like him; he wondered at this.

He stooped and lifted his *possible-sack* to his shoulder. "Never mind," he said quietly and went past her into the street. The bronc she held behind her snorted distrust and sidestepped away. This brought a quick smile of irony to Clay's lips as he went on toward the intersection. He thought, *Neither one of them will trust a man very far!*

He hesitated at the corner of the hotel, his eye quickly ranging the street; then he dropped the duffel-bag at his feet and backed against the building, giving the weight of his shoulders to it while he rolled a cigarette. Men moved in and out of the hotel door, the drone of low talk and short greetings moving with

them; the fragrance of good food drifted out upon the street to him, reminding him of the miles he had covered since his solitary breakfast.

As he thought now of his hunger and let it grow, the batwings of the saloon across the way parted, and the stableman came through. He carried a quart of some liquor, and Clay frowned, not liking to leave his horses around a solitary drinker.

He finished his smoke and flipped the butt into the street and stooped to catch-up his possible-sack again. In swinging it to his shoulder, he glanced back the way he had come and realized the girl and her horse were no longer before the stable nor anywhere in sight on the street beyond. Thinking of it now, he remembered that the stableman did not bear the bitter marks of a solitary drinker. That left the thought of the girl and her eyes alone in his mind. He turned and went to the hotel door.

* * *

TWO RIDERS came to the cottonwood grove on the south shore of the Missouri at Kimbrough's Crossing, as day waned in the sky. One remained in concealment while the second rider crossed. The sun gleamed upon the dripping hide of his horse when he rode out on the far side and went on toward the log buildings and corrals scattered beyond the great trees over there.

When Luke Hunter saw that the Kimbrough corrals were empty, he rode in on the house quickly. It was old and below its sod-roof the wall-logs were thick and heavy. A pack of Indian curs sprang up when they scented him, rushed out to surround him with their challenge. He rode almost to the door, then reined off to one side of it and waited; his thick body rested heavily in the saddle as he sat there, gun drawn and ready.

A throaty curse came from somewhere in the dark interior, threatening the barking dogs, then the whisper of reluctant movement. A massive man appeared in the doorway. He had a mane of bristling gray hair and was dressed in grease-blackened buckskin and moccasins. He stopped at the sight of Hunter. Gray eyes glared from his heavy-beard-matted face; they covered the newcomer with a look that was more contemptuous than alarmed. "So you are back, Luke! Come all the way back up from Texas to find trouble, did ye?"

The horseman shook his head. "Think it over better than that, Hank; mightn't you be a dead man right now, if I had?"

"Booshwagh! I've had bigger holes blowed in me than your pea-shooter can make; and I can still take you off that cayuse and whip you like a coyote whelp. What are you trying to prove?"

Hunter wagged the gun suggestively. "You can't always be safe, even with such a bunch as you have hanging around here most of the time. We could both do better, working together."

Calculation narrowed the old trader's eyes. "Let's hear it."

Hunter shifted in his saddle. "Six months from now," he said, "I will have three new herds up from Texas—gunfighter crews with them."

Kimbrough grunted and chuckled gruffly. "Getting set to start whittling on your *big* neighbors, now—aye Luke?"

"A fat-bellied bunch of dudes in Chicago or New York or London haven't got any property rights out here, so far as I'm concerned, just because they got together and capitalized a syndicate."

"Those syndicate fat boys always put their cow business in the hands of such tough foremen, though," Kimbrough jibed. "Have you explained your ideas to Turk Turnbull or Wing Coburn yet? They ought to be interested!"

"They'll find out about my plans when I'm ready for them to," Hunter said impatiently; "right now I want to talk about us getting together."

"Why?"

"You help me now, and I'll remember it when that other time comes—

Sudden danger made Clay forget Beth's enmity.

when I'm loaded for a real showdown fight here."

Again Kimbrough chuckled. "Let's have it, Luke."

Hunter looked at Kimbrough with dislike for the older man's refusal to take him serious. But he shrugged and said, "There is a Texas Ranger on my backtrail. That is why I came on ahead of the herds." He paused, watching for Kimbrough's reaction. When there was none, he said, "That lawman may ride in here, someday; if he does, I want you to kill him."

Kimbrough looked at him narrowly, studying on this; after a time a silent chuckle briefly shook his heavy stomach. "He's got you scared —aye Luke?"

Hunter again stirred uneasily in his saddle. "He's sort of a distant relative," he said grudgingly, "and I don't hanker for the chore of killing him, myself."

Kimbrough let his head tip back and laughed at that. Then he looked sharply at Hunter again and said, "You mind your own killings, Luke. I remember the skinning I took another time when I teamed up with a Hunter. I'll chance your gunfighters. My Elva gal has needed trading to some man for wife a long time now. I'll tie Buck Lightfoot to me tight, with her. We'll see your Texas bunch whip his wild outfit."

Hunter straightened resolutely in his saddle. "You don't leave me any choice, old man." He raised his gun and slowly began lining it upon Kimbrough. "That ranger can't get help any other place in this country. So—"

Kimbrough snorted and moved clear of the doorway, his right arm, hidden inside until now, coming out. A short-barrelled shotgun was in the

hand; its muzzle tipped to cover Hunter. Gruffly he said, "The only choice you've got is to ride out of here pronto! Move fast, Luke—before you tempt me."

Hunter's mouth opened, and then he closed it abruptly and swallowed with effort, thinking better; he jerked his horse around and spurred back to the ford.

* * *

STEVE CLAY came into the hotel dining room with the freshness of shaving upon his cheeks and a clean shirt upon his back. This had taken some time in the room he had chosen along the upper hallway and the supper trade was almost gone. The waitress gave him a disapproving stare which he appeared not to see as he went on to an empty table in a rear corner and sat down. He leaned back in the chair, gave his weight to it, letting his muscles enjoy the luxury of a moments relaxation. An idle question crossed his mind: *I wonder if he is here?*

He glanced up, his eyes seeking the tardy waitress—then forgot her as another girl came through the broad arch from the lobby. She had golden hair, part of which circled the crown of her head in a heavy braid. The sun had touched the skin of her face with a suggestion of brownness that carried smoothly down across her throat until her neck blended into the soft swell of her upper body. She wore a gingham house dress which, upon her figure, had no complaint of plainness.

She glanced around the room and her eyes crossed Clay and did not seem to see him—then returned. Something passed across the room between them, singing, and raised all his interest; but there seemed to be no softening response in the severe set of her lips, however red and full. Nor in the determined willfulness of her eyes, icy-blue and indifferent.

She looked from him to the idling waitress, still visiting at the table where she had been when Clay came in. The unmistakable air of proprietorship was about the blonde when she looked back, then moved across to ask for Clay's order.

When she had gone with it, he chuckled and thought, *A Chinook breeze should have fun thawing that little icicle!* He speculated upon the matter until she returned to serve his steak and fixings. When she had spread the meal before him, he glanced up with intentional anticipation and approval in his quiet smile. For one moment she smiled in answer; then, as if remembering herself, she turned quickly and moved away. As he watched her go, Clay smiled and for a moment forgot his hunger as he thought, *She would like to be brought alive!* And this was an appealing challenge to him.

2

STEVE CLAY finished his meal and glanced around. The waitress had gone and the blonde proprietress was at the cashier desk, alone in the room with him. He took his hat from the rack behind his chair and went toward her, digging change from his pocket. He put the money upon the desk before her and said, "That was the best meal I have had since I left the Brasada."

She gave him a short, direct glance. "The Brasada? What is that?"

"The big-thicket country of South Texas."

She frowned with quick disapproval. "Texas!"

"And what's wrong with Texas?"

She glanced up again from the ledger over which she seemed to be busy and smiled fleetingly at his mock belligerence. "Most Texans we see in this country—well, they seem to have left of necessity."

He bowed slightly. "That is a kind way to put it; I am grateful. But this is one Texan outside of Texas who is not running."

She gave him a quizzical look. "I rather thought we all were running from something—and only the fools didn't know it."

Clay chuckled at that and her interest brightened. "Are you laughing at me? Perhaps you have some better answers!"

Wonderingly he shook his head. "How did one so young and pretty so soon become so serious and determined? That's for mothers!"

"Maybe you think the peace of this town and safety of its people isn't as important as all the children one mother ever had?"

"You are too young and pretty to be saddled with anything like that," Clay said, watching her; "is that what you are running from?"

Her eyes hardened. "I don't believe I like you."

He shrugged. "Your own words, lady—don't you like them? Or is it being told you're young and pretty that you object to?"

She gave him a cold appraisal which wavered on open dislike. "Sometimes I do wish that steady men, the dependable kind that build towns and develop ranches and make the world a better place than they found it—that they had just a little of the glibness of you drifters. You're all so ready, always, to give a woman everything but security and faithfulness; but you talk so smooth you think that doesn't matter!"

He looked at her through narrowed eyes, studying upon this, and a wry smile slowly moved over his face. "You have read my brand and already put it in your tally book?"

She nodded. "I think so!"

He shook his head with elaborately pretended sadness. "The men in this town must all be fools to let you stay so smug!" Immediately he chuckled and added, "Or maybe it is just that the *young* and *pretty* would better describe you if their order was just reversed."

She did not immediately catch the implication he made by that transposal; when she did, a flush of temper lightly touched her cheeks. But he had turned from her and was going toward the lobby.

CLAY HESITATED in the lobby, then went outside and unhurriedly crossed the street. He went through the swinging batwing doors of the saloon and found one lone rider at the bar. When the paunchy barkeep glanced up from pouring the fellow a drink, Clay held up two fingers. The barman set out another glass and poured.

The other drinker glanced around. "I'm buying tonight, stranger," he said.

Clay looked at him more closely. He found the rider of about a size with himself, but the fellow's hair was coarsely black and his face dark with color that was not tan, making his eyes seem more paley gray. There was a lean and hungry look upon him that suggested an Indian warrior. Clay asked, "Did you just get a baby boy, or something?"

The other man turned his side to the bar and gave Clay his full attention. "I just made me a trade for a squaw!" he said with an air of boasting, and the gray gleam of his piercing eyes sharpened. "The scratchin'est wildcat in Montana; drink to the night I tame her!" He raised his glass and waited for Clay to follow suit.

But Clay toyed with his glass upon the bar and thought on this. He looked directly at the fellow again when finally he said, "I'll drink to the girl and to the hope that she lives to be very happy."

The other man put his drink back upon the bar and straightened, his brows gathering darkly. "That *might* mean wishing me dead, cowboy!"

Clay met his sharp gaze undisturbed and brought a coin from his own pocket and put it upon the bar. "Take it that way if you like it."

The saloonman cleared his throat nervously. "Ease off now, Buck!"

Buck chuckled abruptly. "Don't worry, Barney. I'll not break the town rules—it's saved my hide too

often. But, maybe I will see this fine-feathered fellow in the badands, one day. Maybe I'll offer him another drink. And maybe I won't!" He turned away then and pointed to something behind the bar and asked its price. Clay went to the door and outside.

He paused in the shadows that lay along the gallery, banking either side of the beam of light from the door. He glanced back briefly at the man inside, considering the incident and finding in it an old and familiar pattern, except for its conclusion: a newcomer, a word, a challenge, and a showdown. And the failure of the pattern here, in its final step, was a matter that caused him to wonder.

He moved on to the River Street end of the gallery and saw another door three-quarters of the way along the sidewall. A drowsing, hip-shot horse waited at the hitchrack there. Clay paused, with an impulse to watch which way the breed rode from town; he brought the makings from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette.

The cooling air from the high southward plains was now beginning to move down into the lower land along the river. With it came the thin, wild pungence of sage, blended with that of the scrub pine on the high places. And then he sensed a new thing in the air, a whispering of motion. He made it out, some minutes later, as the still far-off shuffle of many approaching hoofs. This steadily growing sound held his attention now, and he remained unmoving in the deep shadows at the gallery corner. There was a quickening of gait as the sound closened, and then a body of horsemen rushed down the street and materialized from the darkness an instant before they turned in at the saloon. A billowing banner of dust was upraised above them.

ONE WAS down sooner than the rest and leaped upon the gallery floor with an eager vitality and went forward until he could see over the batwings. He wheeled back, a sudden excitement running through him, and urgently waved at those still in the saddle. Clay caught the whisper of a name as it was taken up and passed among them and took with it the spirit of the first man's agitation. Those still mounted rode to the side-entrance to get down.

Then they were going in at either door, jostling one another as if anxious lest they miss some action. When the last one was inside, Clay moved from the corner shadows, going to the batwings and looking over. The dark-faced Buck was still at the bar, a gallon jug now at his elbow. Confronting him was a thick-bodied man on arrogant and saddle-bowed short legs. The uneasy barman broke the freighted quiet that hung between them. "I thought you was on calf roundup with the rest of the Bearpaw Pool, Duncan?"

Duncan did not bother to give him so much as a quick side-glance, but kept his eyes upon the big breed before him. "Our boss just got back from Texas," he said roughly, "and we rode in to celebrate. Never counted on having so much to celebrate at one whack, though!"

Several of the others responded to that with mirthless chuckles and Clay sensed something building here; he moved inside the batwings.

Duncan studied the man before him another moment and then in a voice low with taunting said, "I think we have a loop in this crowd that will just about do for size around the neck of the worst cowthief in Montana. Then we can really celebrate!

Are you coming along quiet, Lightfoot?"

Clay looked closely then at Lightfoot, found a gray contempt and challenge in his eyes and knew him for no coward, whatever else he was. "Would you like to take my gun, Joe?"

The barman moved suddenly, jerked a short-barrelled shotgun out from somewhere below the bar and slammed it across the mahogany resoundingly and drew the hammers back. "No more of that talk, either of you!" he panted hoarsely, like one who had been running. "Joe! You know the rules this town goes by."

Duncan stiffened indignantly. "Are you protecting this cowthieving breed, Gagan?"

"He's never stole a cow inside McCurdy, and what he does outside this town ain't our interest," Gagan insisted quickly. "Leave Buck alone until you can settle it outside town, if you don't want our vigilantes after you!"

Duncan snorted. "We'll go to Larb Crossing to drink, then! We sure won't drink around his sidewinder stink."

Lightfoot chuckled coolly. "I sure would like to make you an extra forty miles of riding, except for Barney's sake. But I was about to leave anyhow." He lifted the jug. "I'm celebrating, too; I've just about got me a squaw bought, and the price is raising more hell for you HL cow-nurses. She would be cheap at twice the price!"

Duncan considered this, the muscles along his hard jaws repeatedly knotting as though he was grinding the bitterness of this thing between his teeth. He wheeled suddenly, turning his back on Lightfoot, and as he came around he saw Clay.

Duncan's eyes fastened upon the stranger as if recognizing a scapegoat. "Who are you?"

CLAY RECEIVED his demand and seemed to consider it for one moment. "My business."

The mark of this new affront was visible as it plowed deep into Duncan's ready-riled temper. A vein-netted crimson flushed his cheeks and his lips closed trap-tight. Grudgingly he said, "Your privilege, I reckon; but let me find you on the HL range south of here and I'll ask again—and I'll get an answer!"

Clay shrugged, still resting straight and easy against the door-jam. "Could be." He saw Buck Lightfoot move discreetly along the bar behind Duncan while the cowman was thus distracted. The fellow went out the side-door and a moment later the sound of a horse's leaving came into the room.

This penetrated Duncan's check-reined anger; he glanced around and finding Lightfoot gone seemed to enjoy a victory. "So the yellow-bellied breed lit a shuck while getting was good!"

Gagan's shotgun disappeared and seeing this, Duncan slapped the bar and called for drinks. Clay took this as his cue to leave; outside he passed around the outfit's horses and went back to the hotel.

The lobby was deserted, except for a painfully fat old man who sat before the broad front window in an ancient leather rocker which showed the ravages of frequent burdening with his weight. The oldster gave Clay a bright-eyed glance of interest. He had the protruding eyes of a talker, though there was a veiled secretiveness about his lids. Clay saw this, but decided to chance a question. "Whose is the HL outfit, anyhow?"

The old fellow straightened importantly, shifting his bulk over the chairs protestive groanings. "Why it's Luke Hunter's spread."

Clay nodded his thanks and started to turn away, a deep satisfaction in him as he thought, *They will lead me to him if I trail them!*

But the old one did not want this ended so shortly. "Luke's in Texas bringing up more cows, I hear," he said quickly and began to wheeze. "Could be risky business, too, I'd think; I've heard tell his old man, Snake—he was heading home drunk

a few years back and fell off his horse and drug to death—I've heard tell he left Texas between sundown and sunup, years ago when Luke was just a tad. Something about a feud that folks he worked for down there was mixed up in, or something. Anyhow I figure I'd thought twice before going back, if I was Luke. Do you know him?"

Clay shook his head. "The outfit just rode in across the street. I was only wondering. But thanks." He still was not near enough the door, however.

"They'd be your best bet if you're looking for a riding job," the old man persisted. "Maybe I could intro—"

"Jeb!" A new voice put in quietly, arresting his flow of words immediately. Clay glanced around and found the blonde girl coming out of the shadows of the lower hallway. He nodded with a smile of appreciation and would have gone on, but she asked, "Did you see the man who inquired for you?"

"Why—I'm afraid not."

"He asked for you just after you went out, awhile ago," she explained coolly; "I let him go up to your room."

Clay nodded. "Thank you. I'd better go up." He went to the stairs and briskly up them to conceal his puzzlement. This was a strange thing, that anyone should be asking for him when he was two thousand miles from anyone who knew him.

THE UPPER hall was full of shadow, illuminated only by what light came to its head from the lobby and by a single low-turned lamp in a wall-bracket near the door at its foot. He went into the shadows there and his steps slowed as he neared the door of his room. He came to it and paused. A strip of light showed under its bottom edge; this, too, was strange—if it were some kind of an ambush.

Clay loosened his gun in its holster and turned the knob. The door gave before him. He pushed hard and stopped as it swung. Then he saw a merry-eyed young redhead inside, sitting upon the edge of his bed, gleefully watching this. He felt foolish for his caution and glanced up the hall to make certain no one else had observed this. Then he went in and closed the door. "You redheaded clown! I suppose this is your idea of a large prank?"

"Why I just thought it woud be a good idea to look you up," the redhead protested with elaborate innocence.

"It would have been a better idea two thousand miles ago, Ting," Clay quietly said. "What is the matter? Did the O'Banions decide they couldn't trust me with this chore?"

Ting O'Banion shook his head sharply. "Nothing like that! But with the graybeards of my tribe undecided about making a fresh start at slaughtering off you Clays, depending mainly on what you do about one Luke Hunter, they decided a firsthand report might make it easier to decide on continued peace—decide they'd had vengeance aplenty."

"And if you mix into some fracas up here and don't get back with your story—what then?"

Ting shrugged. "Then I'd advise that you take the Hunter carcass back to Texas with you, however bothersome that chore might be."

Clay watched the younger man for a time while he studied on this, and finally said, "I hope you realize that the lives of some mighty good men

in both families may depend on you; do you?"

Ting shrugged lightly and rocked forward off the bed to his feet, starting his spur rowels softly singing. He moved to the door and hesitated, "Maybe you could at least stand the help of hearing how the lands lays in this country?"

"Do you know?"

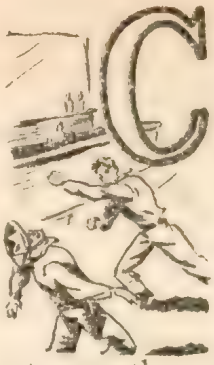
"I didn't waste no time snooping around on the trail—I've been here a week." Ting paused, waiting for a rising of Clay's interest. But when he realized the older man was not going to let him have that satisfaction, he said, "Your Hunter cousin—"

"That is going too far!" Clay immediately objected. "Shirttail kin like him, the son of an ex-hired hand, are no joking matter!"

Ting chuckled. "Well, anyhow—he's the big dog on the south range. He's run off all the little fellows. A big syndicate outfit neighbors him on the east. Another one on the west. All three run south to where there's no steady water of a summer nor the needful shelter of a winter. North is the badlands—renegade country for sure. Kimbrough, an old Indian trader and squawman, is the king-pin there. Besides other things, he deals in cattle that an outfit of breeds rustle on this side—mostly from Hunter. He and Hunter hate each other plenty, I guess. But I have a hunch they all hate any outside lawman more. The only kind anyone in these parts has ever known were bounty hunters. And mostly they've stayed, permanent—that's what keeps the soil so fertile. So you'd better keep *your* eyes and ears open, ranger."

He tossed Clay a light salute as he finished speaking and opened the door and stepped out. Clay breathed a cuss word, thinking of the girl who might be waiting to see O'Banion leave, and of the suspicions such obvious secretiveness would arouse. But he forgot that as the sound of moving horses came faintly to him from the street. Hunter's crew was riding out!

3



CLAY went quickly into the hall and up it and by the time he could reach the lobby door, without seeming to hurry, only a dust cloud remained to mark the HL outfit's leaving. Old Jeb was still in his rocker; Clay went out upon the gallery and on until he came to its River Street end. He glanced toward the livery, knowing he was too late to get his horse without drawing attention, but for the moment at a loss for a better place to go. Without hurry he went toward it.

He had come almost to the outer edge of the pool of shadowy light, spread listlessly by the lantern hung midway of the broad doorway, when he heard the low murmur of a woman's voice, sharp and insistent. "But I won't have her staying in the hotel, or any place else in town all night, in that condition! You've got to help me, Bill."

"Maybe you'd like me just to haul her outside town somewhere and leave her?" Clay recognized the hostler's voice.

"Why couldn't you just rope her in her saddle and take her across the ferry and let her horse take her on in?" the feminine voice countered.

"First place, she's riding a green bronc; the cayuse likely doesn't claim Kimbrough's as home. Gawd only knows where she might wind up—and what shape she would be in. Second is, how would you like to be *in her condition* and have one of them wild breeds, or maybe even one of them white renegades, find you alone that way somewhere?"

"Aren't you being awfully pure, Bill? Likely all of them that ever wanted her have already had her, anyhow!"

"I think she would hardly be so upset about Old Hank trading her to Buck Lightfoot, if that was the

case; she did this, she said, because she knew what men with a hangover look like—and she wants to look so bad that even Buck Lightfoot may decide he isn't interested. And beyond that, I've got an idea there was something more. Haven't you ever been lonesome and scared and worried?"

"Yes. I've been worried."

"Well drunkenness and worry come from the same place, sis," Bill said quietly. "A lack of faith—nothing to tie to—to really believe in." He hesitated, and then slowly added, "In the Lord's eyes, I reckon one is the same as the other. You worried—Elva got drunk."

"Why Bill," the woman laughed lightly, "you sound almost like a preacher. What a surprise—"

"A lot you would know about that!" he interrupted ironically. Regret was plain in his voice as he said, "I've never heard you talk like this before, Beth. Tonight you sound like you'd fit real nice in some place big enough to have an old hens' uplift society—where long sharp tongues and a quickness to judge others can find company."

A moment of complete silence followed. Out in the darkness, Clay was aroused by the sudden guilty feeling of eavesdropping. He turned back to Trail Street, but the exchange began again before he could get beyond earshot.

"I'll remember that, Bill French! If you are so noble, why don't you take her home and be sure no bad man gets at her?"

"I wasn't cut out for a hero, that's why. And you have no reasonable excuse for not wanting her to stay until she's able to take care of herself again."

"You mean you're afraid!"

"Don't try that on me," French said calmly. "I mean I'm no hand with a gun, and I also am no fool. If some of that wild bunch came across me with her the way she is, I have no doubt what conclusion their low minds would jump to. There's no telling what they might do."

"You're not much force, are you?"

"You've never known a man that was—or you'd have long since got the taming you're over-due for," French said, quietly, "But the man that can get that job done will ride in, one day. And from all I've seen of life, he's as apt to be a stinker as a gentleman, and ride right on out, once he's wrapped you around his finger. I'm sticking around these gawd-forsaken parts just to see that happen."

OUT IN the darkness, Clay again turned and this time quickly crossed the distance to the stable door. "Pardon me," he sent his voice ahead of him as he reached the softly illuminated circle from the lantern. He found Bill French and the blonde Beth facing each other across the wide driveway. "I was coming over to have a look at my ponies before turning in, and I happened to overhear some of what was being said here. I wonder if I might be of assistance?"

She returned his look frankly, inspecting him as she thought on his words, and at length decided, "I dislike being obligated to strangers, but in this case perhaps I have no choice." She studied him another moment before fully deciding, and then nodded slightly.

"I like to know the names of people I do favors," Clay said.

"Beth McCurdy," she returned shortly, and turned outside without showing interest in his name, taking it for granted he would follow.

"Her pappy founded this oasis of paradise," Bill French said and gave Clay a sidelong glance.

"That explains things, does it?"

French wagged his head pityingly. "You look like a nice guy, and I doubt if you have the vaguest idea what you may be mixing into."

Clay gravely considered the other man, and liked him upon close inspection. "There are some jobs I find hard to pass by," he said at length. "I happen to be fair to middling handy with a gun—and maybe passable as a fool, too."

French nodded. "Good luck, then!" He gave Clay a half-smile of tentative approval.

CLAY found Elva Kimbrough waiting in her saddle. "I'm glad," she sighed when he had come close enough for her to recognize him. She caught her breath in a small hiccup and there was a great weariness upon her, slumping her shoulders with its weight. She held out a hand to be helped down. She hit the ground and caught her head between her hands with a gasp and swayed against Clay. He steadied her with a hand on either shoulder. "I wasn't as drunk as you and Beth McCurdy thought," she murmured thickly; "I heard you sticking up for me."

"It was Bill French that really stuck up for you."

She raised her head sowly, when the dizziness had passed. Her eyes met his. As best she could, in the darkness, she studied him. At length she asked, her voice bitter, "What's the matter—you too pure to have any interest in a girl that gets drunk?"

This surprised Clay. "I believe in square poker, a fair fight, and in playing it just as straight with the women."

"Ah!" she scoffed sharply. "That man doesn't live." She smothered another hiccup. "Some of you have your little rules about honor in games you play with other men—but with women, the only thing you don't grab at is something you don't want. I know! I've been fighting them off since I was thirteen." She giggled abruptly. "Maybe I should have got myself drunk sooner!"

This was a thing Clay did not feel equal to. "Someone's given you a rough time, sis. You're all mixed up."

"Not me! No one ever cared enough about me to bother mixing me up. They let me see things straight, for myself."

Clay studied on this and felt a great pity for this girl whose beauty had brought her such bitterness. "Why bother fighting them off, if that is the best there is to hope for?"

She took that question and considered it, looked up at him; her voice

was not only defiant, but lonely too. "First, it was because Old Hank said he would beat me to death if ever he heard tell of someone—of me being bad. And after awhile it was just because I hated them all so much I'd fight until I died just so they'd miss getting something they wanted."

She buried her face in her hands suddenly and began a heavy sobbing. "What was the use though—when Old Hank trades me like an Injun squaw to the meanest one of the bunch. It would have been better being beat to death a long time ago."

He took her gently by the shoulders and drew her close so that her head was steadied upon his chest. Somewhere a dam gave away and her tears came as if they had been impounded all of her life. It was some time that she rested unprotestingly in his arms, weak with crying. When this had finally passed, he cupped her chin in one hand and raised her

face to him. Leaning down, he kissed her.

When he had done this, he straightened and looking into her eyes, said, "I won't do that again—unless I know it is for keeps, and that you want it. But I know why other men have been after you so."

Her lip began to tremble as if she was upon the verge of new weeping, and in a small voice she cried, "Why did you do it? I'll be Buck Lightfoot's squaw tomorrow! Won't that be bad enough without remembering that there maybe was at least one decent man in the world?"

This girl was like a ball of tangled twine, one knot unsnarling only to reveal another. "What is this trade your father is making with Lightfoot?"

"He's using me to tie Buck Lightfoot to him, in case Luke Hunter makes trouble," she said; "Hunter's bringing up new herds and gunfighter crews from Texas to make a fight with for more range."

"Luke Hunter is going to be back in Texas on trial for murder before his new herds or crews get half way to Montana," said Clay. "Let's go on in and see your father."

"You'll just get yourself killed and won't help me one bit," she said sharply, exasperated.

"Mount up!" he said quietly. He turned to his own saddle.

THEY CAME to a pole bridge, after a time; the hollow echo of their horses' hoofs upon it ran ahead and instantly an uproar of dog barking rushed out to meet them. Elva spoke sharply to the pack as it came from the darkness and swarmed about them with its vicious snarling. When she had raised her voice enough to reach through their bedlam, they quickly quieted, except for a craven whining here and there, as if seeking her pardon. The riders went on through the deeper gloom pooled beneath a towering grove of cottonwoods, the dogs going with them and crowding in almost under their horses, as if vying to be nearest Elva.

The ranchyard opened before them, and Clay saw a line of waiting horses before a squatty log house that bulked long and low and even in the darkness had a look of rough strength about it. Its windows were sightless eyes, dull and fixedly staring into the night without light in them.

The door opened a crack so that a narrow beam of feeble light reached into the night. "That you, Elva?" a rough voice demanded.

"Yes, Hank."

"Come in here!"

She turned to Clay, catching him by the arm. "Please go on back now—quickly, while you can."

"I will go in there with you."

She sighed, half sobbing, seeming to realize the hopelessness of opposing him. "Go on in then," she said quietly. "I'll switch your saddle to this horse and be in later."

He stepped out of the saddle and went to the door, pushed it open and heard a man moving away inside. The hackles along his spine tingled and he went on through the door before his imagination could work further. He glanced from side to side as he went in. He saw two groups of men facing one another from either side of the room, and there was a distinct feeling of division here; now, however, their attention was wholly upon him.

Clay pushed the door shut behind him and put his back against it. His eyes centered upon the old grizzly of a man nearest him and he knew this must be the man who had called to Elva from the door, and therefore would be Kimbrough. "She will be in directly," he said. He glanced then at the men grouped on his left.

Clay recognized Buck Lightfoot standing before them, and his look moved slowly across the leader of the rustler breeds. The big fellow's eyes were blandly impassive with no show of the thoughts behind them. Clay looked on, and behind Lightfoot's squatting men saw a pair of bunks built into the angle of the inside corner. A window with a bearskin nailed over it was mid-way along the end wall, and another like it was in the front wall, carefully

blinded lest some enemy look in from outside with advantage.

CLAY glanced back at Kimbrough and without looking directly at them, saw the hard-faced outfit hunkered watchfully upon home-made chairs around a table at the room's other end; they were about equal in number with Lightfoot's bunch. Behind them was a fireplace. A door opened at that inside corner into some room beyond.

"Well, who are you? And what did you lose here?"

Clay looked at Kimbrough calmy. "Name is Steve Clay. To be more exact, it's Ranger Steve Clay, from Texas."

"Bounty hunter, huh?"

"Not so's you could notice it; I draw a range-hand's wages and furnish my own horses to boot. This trip I'm on my own, not even drawing wages; it's personal business."

"Must be weak in the head then! If I was a lawman—" began Kimbrough, but thought better of it and left the rest unsaid.

"I like to live where a boy and girl can stand up to be married without a stranger riding in on pretext of being a wedding guest and murdering the boy in cold blood without giving him a chance," Clay slowly said.

Kimbrough grunted. "Hunter did that?" After considering it, he nodded. "Sounds crazy enough to fit him; he goes loco when he's drinking."

"I aim to take him back to Texas to answer to the law for murder."

"Law ain't exactly a popular word around here, son," the old trader said. "Why go to all that bother?"

"Tell me why *you* haven't ambushed him long ago?"

Kimbrough shook his heavy head. "That's different. His old man short-changed me on a partnership, years ago; they've been paying me back ever since. They raise the beef and when it's ready for market a good many head always seem to drift across to this side. It's been a real nice arrangement. He hasn't shown

no hankering to make trouble with me until just here right recent."

"He'll never get the chance, now," Clay said. "He shot my sister's fiance, one of my best friends, in cold blood. He's going back to Texas with me—and he won't be coming back."

A quiet went through the room after he had said that and then there was a stir on the right, when Kimbrough offered no reply. A man among those ranged about the table said, "Hunter is as safe as a baby in its mother's arms—if you're all he has to worry about. If one ranger was ever allowed to come in here and get a man and take him back to Texas, before long another one would be trying it. Did you actually expect that you'd leave here alive?"

4

STEVE CLAY found the eyes of every one in the room upon him, curious to see how he would meet this challenge. He turned fully to the man, studying him. The voice was strangely like the voice of the spokesman for the bunch he had tangled with in the upriver darkness. He finally said, "I will leave here alive, all right—you may not live to see it, though."

The other man received this, considered it, and knew a challenge had been put that could not be turned aside from, among such men as these. These were men among whom a fallen leader didn't live long; this was between the two of them now, and not a thing the others would help him with.

Clay watched these things move across his mind and when purpose crystalized, Clay recognized it. The fellow raised from his chair without abrupt movement.

Old Kimbrough watched all this with a curious fascination, then at the last instant roared, "Ease off there, Evans!" A long stride put him between them. "You've been kicking about the deal I was cooking with Buck, for Elva; this ranger will squash the deal permanent, if he takes Hunter out of the picture altogether."

"That can be tended to otherwise," said Evans over a hard-checked anger. "Now step aside; this lawman is ripe for planting."

"Maybe you want to tend to Hunter?" Kimbrough persisted.

"That will keep!" Evans said sharply, his voice rising. "Stand aside."

"Make your offer now," the old trader insisted; "I ain't being traded out of that gal for a job I can get done for free. Make a better bid than the ranger's—or I'll shoot you for him, if you try a pass at him otherwise."

One of those in the bunch behind Evans slowly got up; several others followed. Clay saw this and read its meaning, but old Kimbrough threw his great voice at them as at so many misbehaving children. "Sit down, you tinhorns! Who keeps you living in these badlands like humans—George Evans, here, or me? Sit down!"

Here and there one of those still sitting reached up and pulled one of them down. The others wavered before Kimbrough's glare. One by one their knees weakened and let them reluctantly back into their chairs. Evans sensed this crumbling of his support without seeing it. He asked bitterly, "Have you thrown in with the law, Kimbrough?"

"I'm the law on this side of the river!" Kimbrough said sharply and his voice rumbled between the walls. "No outside bounty hunter has ever taken a man out of here. But this lawman's after no man on this side. He's here to get Luke Hunter. I say *leave him be!*"

THERE were shadows before the hotel which the rising sun had not yet reached with its warmth, and their chill struck through Steve Clay's clothing. He backed against the hotel corner, began rolling a cigarette while his eyes searched for a more convenient place where there was sunshine. But as he finished the cigarette and leaned away from the wall, the sound of horses came down to him from the head of the street. Looking that way, he saw a body of horsemen moving into town at an easy trot, and he forgot the unpleasant chill and backed again against the hotel corner, waiting.

Clay pulled his hat forward a little more so that it would shadow his face, and watched the oncoming horsemen. Before they came abreast of the saloon and began turning in at its hitchrack, he had caught the HL cheek-brand on the jaws of several horses. That turned his eyes to the big, thick-set man who had ridden at the head of the outfit. This fellow had the look of prosperity about him, and in the saddle had an appearance of stiff-backed arrogance. Clay watched him step heavily down.

Steve had been deep in the South Texas Brasada on a manhunt when Jim O'Banion's tragic murder had stopped his sister Lottie's wedding; until this moment he had never laid eyes upon Luke Hunter. But his lawman's instinct stirred within him now, as it oft-times had in the past, fitting a name and description to an unknown face.

One of the riders on the outer edge of the bunch glanced directly at him before reining in at the saloon. The fellow turned in abruptly then, and leaned close to the first saddlemate he came to. The other man glanced around with hostile curiosity.

This was a thing Clay had not expected, but an intuitive knowledge told him he must move quickly, or be moved against. He shoved away from the hotel wall and went to the street and across it toward the rancher, standing now at the hitchrack with his dismounting crew about him. "Are you Luke Hunter?" Clay asked quietly, getting in close to the man before most of the crew knew of his presence.

"I am," declared the rancher with the surprise of an arrogant man confronted by what appears, to him, to be arrogance.

Clay's gun was in his hand, but Hunter had not realized this until he raised it; then the rancher's eyes widened with incredulousness. "What is this?" he demanded in a voice that was purposely loud to attract his men's attention.

"I arrest you in the name of the Texas Rangers," Clay said; "drop your gunbelt and surrender."

"Why, you fool—"

The heavy report of a rifle shook the morning quiet and a cowboy's hat leaped from his head. He jerked his hand away from his half-drawn gun. For the moment, Hunter's men lost their interest in defending him.

A challenging voice followed the shot. "The first man that moves will catch the next one where it will damage him permanent!" Under his breath, Clay cursed. It was Ting O'Banion. But there was no time now for regrets; he moved in behind Hunter and put his gun in the small of the rancher's broad back.

"I have the hammer of this gun rocked back under my thumb, and if the thumb slips your boss gets shot," he raised his voice to the crew. "You might hit me without getting him too, but he will be a dead man before I am."

Clay prodded Hunter in the back. "Get going!"

"Who are you?" Hunter tried to stall, moving reluctantly into the street.

"Ranger Steve Clay, of Texas."

"But the Clays are kin—"

STEVE jabbed him hard in the tender part of his back so that he broke off, catching his breath sharply. Then through clenched teeth he mumbled, sullenly and uncertain, "You surely don't figure you can get—"

"I'll live as long as you do," Clay interrupted firmly.

Then Beth McCurdy appeared from the hotel. She paused upon the gallery just long enough to see what was happening, then like an impatient mother summoning distant offspring, she cried, "Vigilance! Vigilance! Angus. Charlie. Tom. Turk. Hurry!"

Men began appearing all along the street. Some were still in their undershirts, pants suspenders hooked over knobby shoulders. One's face was half-shaved, drying lather whitening the other cheek. Each one had a shotgun.

Luke Hunter tried to pause and bend a sidewise leer at Clay, but Steve only jabbed him harder. "Keep moving!"

"You can't pull this in McCurdy!" Hunter cried with exasperation; "you had better back down while you can."

"What is the meaning of this?" Beth demanded from the hotel gallery as Clay neared with his captive.

"I have arrested this man for murder and I'm returning him to Texas for trial."

She stamped a foot, indignantly. "Wait! We have our own law here. Any other law has to take its prisoners outside the town; do you understand?"

The end of the hotel gallery was just ahead. The protecting sidewall of the hotel was beyond it. "I'll shoot my prisoner and the first man who tries to stop me," Clay warned as the shotgun armed Vigilance Committeemen drew near.

"Shoot him in the legs if you have to, but stop him!" cried Beth. The committeemen had come as close to Clay as they could without some action, and the way he continued to ignore them was disconcerting. Somehow they did not find him an inviting target; they wavered with indecision, then stopped and would have

watched him go.

Beth McCurdy saw this with a gasp of outrage. Then she ran to the end of the gallery, and as Clay passed, threw herself at him. He raised an arm to ward her off, but she ducked under and batted his gun down. It went off and Hunter leaped frantically against the hotel wall, then turned and saw what was happening. He closed in, hitting Clay with a raking blow along the jaw that made the ranger stumble back. One bootheel struck a corner of the gallery steps, staggering Clay. His arms flew wide, as he fought for his balance, and he lost his grip upon his gun.

Hunter pressed his advantage, hitting Clay again while he was off-balance. Clay went down. He rolled clumsily from his awkward landing, trying to get away. But Hunter was before him as he started up. A heavy boot was driving at him with a crippling kick for his throat or face. And now the whole HL crew was headed across the street for the finish.

5

BETH McCURDY threw herself against Hunter so that the kick only grazed Clay's jaw. Immediately big Angus McKnight rushed in and shoved Hunter back, placed his bulk before Beth as a shield. This seemed to break the paralysis that had gripped the Vigilance Committeemen and they swung their guns upon the approaching range crew. This stopped the cowhands. Only Bob Blake and Charlie Dodge, Hunter's professional gunfighters, hired to represent his personal interests, came on with a show of readiness to make a fight of it.

"He's off your back!" Beth yelled at Hunter; "go on about your business."

Hunter glanced sharply at her and then at McKnight and seemed to realize the ranger was beyond his reach for the present. The rage in his eyes subsided; he looked around and saw his crew stopped and uneasily waiting in the middle of the street while Blake and Dodge came slowly on. He raised a hand at the advancing pair and stopped them and then turned back and said, "I'm sorry, Beth. I hope I didn't hurt you." He turned his back on McKnight with an obvious disdain and moved around the committeemen and went toward the saloon.

Clay gathered himself from the fall and got up with disgust heavy in him. He looked about for his gun. When he saw it, he went to it and picked it up and then turned toward the livery stable without giving Beth McCurdy the barest notice.

"I hope I can do you another favor real soon!" she thrust irritably at his back.

"Don't bother," he said without looking back; "likely I'll die young enough without that kind of help to hurry it any."

An unreasoning fury destroyed Beth's usual poise as she watched his receding back; she stomped one foot and felt the futility of her anger.

Luke Hunter paused upon the saloon gallery, as his men trooped through the batwings, glanced back and saw Beth looking after Clay. He saw her display of anger and jealousy mounted through him. Her attention was for the ranger and not for Luke; he had never been able to make such an impression upon the armour of coolness she always held about her. It was almost as if the other man had

somehow stolen his victory; he turned abruptly and went on through the batwings and ordered drinks set up for his outfit.

NOON WAS near when Hunter crossed the street to the hotel again and climbed the groaning stairs. In keeping with the range country's custom for ranchers of his caliber, he kept a room permanently reserved. It served as headquarters when he was in town and was furnished to his taste. Some nights it was the scene of high-stake poker games and others, when he had overindulged his lusty appetites, it provided a place of refuge. He went that way now to wash for dinner.

He reached the head of the stairs and found Beth coming up the hallway toward him. He paused and sent his booming voice at her in cordial greeting. "It has been a long time, Beth; have you missed me?"

She glanced briefly at him, unsmilingly. "Things have been very pleasant." He saw that she was going on past him and reached out and caught her by the elbow, turning her back.

"Come on, girl," he gently reproved. "Let's not be that way!"

She eyed him calmly. "That way—what way?"

"Beth, I'm not joshing," he said earnestly. "You and I can go a long ways in this country! I'm going to be king-pin of these parts one day before too long."

"And I should jump at an opportunity to be Mrs. King-pin, is that it?" she mimicked. "How romantic!"

"I may not be too good at putting such things," he said with poor grace, "but I am damn good at more important things. You can push a man too far, you know."

She regarded him quietly. "And just what could you do if you were pushed too far?"

He shrugged and looked past her, she jerked her arm from him and went on down the stairs. He thought, *This must be that damn Joe's fault! She has heard about his fool try at Lightfoot in the saloon, last night.*

He went to the door of his room and fitted the key to the lock. He turned the knob with the key, went in; the musty smell of dead air met him. He closed the door, his head bowed with the weight of unpleasant thoughts. Turning, he glanced toward the front windows and straightened with surprise; Buck Lightfoot sat in Hunter's favorite rocker before one window, a leg nonchalantly thrown over a chair arm. His loosely-aimed gun was in one hand.

"Must be deep in some dark scheme, Hunter."

Hunter's first alarm began subsiding. "You wild-haired breed—what are you trying to pull?"

Lightfoot shrugged. "Just evening up the score for last night; your boys gave me quite a thrill."

Joe Duncan's doings again! Hunter thought. Aloud he said, "So?"

"See how easy it is?" Lightfoot let him think on that and after a time added, "This way, sooner or later, we are both dead."

A sudden smile broke the tense lines of Hunter's face as he remembered having used almost the same words in his call upon Kimbrough the day before. He saw surprise in Lightfoot's eyes and was pleased. Like one going over familiar lines, he said, "Well—let's hear it."

Lightfoot studied him suspiciously, not liking his amusement because he could not understand it. "Why not work together?" the breed suggested quietly, after a time; "we would both make more."

Hunter smiled wryly. "I suggested the same thing to old Kimbrough, myself. And he ran me off the place."

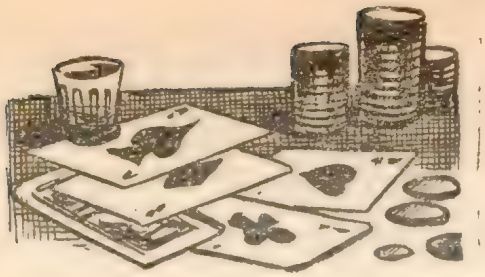
"So what?"

"So he is still king-pin of the badlands, if I am not badly mistaken."

Lightfoot leaned forward. "You, working with me, could easily change that. You could wipe him out—any time you wanted to."

Hunter looked at him with unconcealed skepticism. "If it is so easy—why don't you do it yourself? I am certain you would like to have his place over there well enough."

Lightfoot shook his head. "There are too many outlaws in those badlands who are beholding to him; they would be against me, if I did



the job."

"And if *I* did it?"

"Whenever you are ready to begin whittling on your big neighbors, I could help you along by making their cattle begin to vanish."

Hunter thought on this and at last said grudgingly, "How do we start?"

Lightfoot relaxed, giving himself to the chair. "I will draw most of Kimbrough's crew with me the next time there is an excuse for a last raid on you. While they are gone—" he shrugged, "you should have little trouble with the rest."

Hunter thought on this and when he failed to discover anything objectionable, said: "Joe has brought in a gather of the best heifers they've picked up so far during roundup. He is planning to breed them to a Shorthorn bull. They are in the holding pasture—only two men riding guard."

Lightfoot's face remained as immobile as a full-blooded Indian's. "Tonight?"

Hunter nodded, studied Lightfoot a moment. "Have you got any ideas about the best way to get at Kimbrough?"

Lightfoot thought on this, his eyes narrowing, and Hunter tired of waiting and went to the bed and sat down. At length Lightfoot said, "Kimbrough is hard to surprise. For one thing, you can't get in very close, usually, before the dogs start yapping. Once he gets forted up in that house you—"

"Would have to do better than the Blackfeet ever did in the early days."

"Do you happen to have a gunfighter that none of Kimbrough's bunch have seen?" Lightfoot asked.

Hunter nodded. "A new man I brought with me from Texas."

Lightfoot shrugged. "It may not be too hard, then."

6

BILL FRENCH moved one of his two remaining kings and said, "Roundup sure makes things slow in this town. I ought to be a checker champ—I kill enough time with them."

"You need a job like mine to appreciate checkers," said Clay, studying the board. "It is like manhunting, in a way." He picked up a king and began a series of angling jumps that left Bill with but one lone checker.

French shook his head sadly. "I sure hope you're never after my hide, then!" He sighed and shrugged and then brightened, asking: "Do you often run into a jackpot like that one this morning?"

"There are few women that nutty in the world, thank goodness," said Clay without interest. "Is there something between that McCurdy girl and Hunter?"

French chuckled. "I reckon Luke would like to think so."

Clay grimaced wryly. "It would serve him right. The prospect almost makes me wish I didn't have to take him back to Texas."

Ting O'Banion stepped in from outside the driveway door. Clay glanced at him and asked, "Are they pulling out?"

Ting shook his head. "Just a horse coming down the alley."

French got up. "I'll take a look."

Clay tipped his chair back against the wall behind him and shifted his holster around where the gun would be more convenient. The soft plod of a walking horse came to him now. He waited idly while it neared; then Bill French let a relieved chuckle run from him and said, "Well, now!"

Clay could see the horse as it was reined up outside. He lowered his chair so that the rider came into his range of vision. A pleasant sensation

went through him and immediately behind it a feeling of mild self-derision; if Beth McCurdy had aroused a quickened interest the night before, her hair done in a plain braid and dressed in an equally plain gingham dress, she presented a picture now that no man would want to look upon without interest and approval. He would be coffin-bait, otherwise!

Her hair was done in long, rippling curls, caught together at the knap of her neck with a black ribbon, the ends dancing near her tiny waist. She wore a trim-fitting riding skirt of dark wine and sat astride her saddle with an accustomed ease that no horseman could look upon without pleasure. "Bill, I'm just starting for a little ride, but it sounds like Baldy may have a loose right hind shoe," she said, not once glancing into the driveway. "Would you please look? Maybe it should be reset before I go on."

"Sure," French said. "But he can get his foot off the ground easier if you'll step down."

"Why Bill! That's mean," Beth said, and came out of the saddle before he could lift a hand to help her. "Why don't you come right straight out and say you think I'm fat?"

But Bill would not take the bait. He ran his hand down Baldy's hind leg to the feathers, lifted the hoof and drew the leg back until he could get the hoof between his legs and hold it steady for examination. Beth dropped the reins, telling Baldy to stand, and stepped back to watch. Immediately she saw that Old Jeb had not done a neat job. Marks of his prying against the shoe were plain upon the hoof. "Someone has been monkeying—" Bill French began.

She interrupted instantly. "Will it have to be reset?"

FRENCH glanced at her and her composure almost deserted her before the directness of his eyes. "Before you can ride very far," he said. "Would you like for me to do it?"

She shook her head with a smile of appreciation. "Angus has always taken care of Baldy's feet. He'd be hurt if—"

French let the hoof down and turned to face her. "Then you must want me to take him over there?"

He infuriated her and she walked to Baldy's head to hide it. She caught the reins and turned back. As she did this, she glanced into the driveway for the first time. She looked back at French and made a little declining shake of her head which set the long curls dancing. "I see you have customers; I can take him."

"I won't coax you," French warned in a low voice.

"It is awfully cool here," she said lightly.

"Yes, and you are awfully pretty today, too," French mimicked.

She ignored him and glanced di-

rectly at Clay. "Would you mind if I wait here?"

One of his eyebrows lifted. "I'd be a fool to," he drawled easily. "Besides—since when does one mind what the queen does in her own domain?" Beth chose to let that pass, and looked away.

She looked at Ting. He blushed and got up. "I always did like to watch a good smith fit a shoe," he said awkwardly; "I think I'll mosey along with Bill."

Clay thought of Hunter's crowd on Trail Street and said, "Watch yourself, fella."

Before he went out the doorway, Ting glanced back at Clay with a look that Beth missed. "Remember your own advice, ranger."

Clay looked at Beth. He stood up. "You look real pretty this afternoon." His words had the goodness of sincerity about them. "That outfit is more than becoming; and I like your hair that way, too."

His sincerity touched her and her calm almost deserted her. None of the men around McCurdy seemed to know how to talk that way, except Bill French; but sarcasm always had too much a part in his compliments. Clay's words touched a chord of longing and she almost forgot her purpose. She looked away to cover her momentary confusion and swallowed quickly. In a small voice she said, "Thank you."

She looked back at Clay and an excitement moved through him because of what he saw deep in her eyes. He thought, *She wants to be kissed!* And could not quite believe it.

He moved closer to her and looked steadily down into her eyes and she would not turn them away. "You are very beautiful; has anyone ever told you?"

She suddenly was so aware of him that her poise was threatened and she swallowed hard again and desperately wanted to look away. She managed a small smile and to distract him asked, "Have you changed your mind about me—since this morning?"

Clay received this and a sober line went through his face; seeing this she immediately regretted her words. Clay said, "I was not thinking of this morning enough, perhaps." He turned from her gravely and started across the driveway, remembering his reflection of the previous moment and thinking, *She will have to wait a long time to get kissed if the job depends upon me!*

ANXIOUS lest he again ignore her, she sent a jibe at his back. "You surely will admit that what you attempted this morning was very foolish."

He came around, slowly, and gave her a pitying look. "Maybe you're going to tell me how to do a ranger's job?"

She shook her head. "Not in Texas." Her tone was as gentle as the rippling the motion set up in her curls.

"How about in Montana, then?"

She shrugged. "I might have some suggestions."

Her assurance nettled him. "Some women always have *suggestions!* They run men with them." This turned his mind back to his other reflections and he thought, *She likely thinks no mere mortal man would dare!* Immediately a wild impulse moved through him: *I'm just the cowhand that can show her!*

He stepped close to her and raised his hands to her waist and said, "Let's hear your suggestions. What would you say my next move should be?"

Perhaps it was the touch of his hands, or his intent may have been in his eyes. Beth's coolness abandoned her and left her breath caught in her throat. She could not answer him. He lifted her and brought her close; before she could summon up resistance, he kissed her.

Clay released her and stepped back, watchfully, and a small pain was throbbing in his chest. He realized he had forgotten his breathing. He was still electrified with the tingling thrill of her response and his eyes were eager for signs of her satisfaction.

Her eyes opened as he stepped

Elva was used to dealing with only one kind of men—wolves all.

back and no ice was in them. He started to smile, but immediately she thrust a cloud of scorn across the warmth. "Should I slap you, now—as you deserve?"

His breathless glow became ashes and he turned his back on her and at first meant not even to bother about an answer. But she had destroyed the perfection of the thing he had shared with her and he found himself wanting to hurt her more than it seemed ignoring her could ever do. "A lady never has to think, much less ask, what to do about an insult," he said, hoping it could convey half his contempt for her dishonesty.

She sniffed. "I suppose you're conceited enough actually to think I enjoyed it?"

He went on across the driveway and stepped through the saddleroom door. There he turned back briefly to look at her and say, "Far more than I did, no doubt; it was nothing new, to me."

Her eyes widened as if he had struck her. "Why you—you— Oh!"

* * *

ELVA KIMBROUGH turned the memory of Steve Clay's kiss in her mind, caressing it like a priceless keepsake.

It may have been an accumulation, within her, of latent longing; longing from generations of women hungering for but one crumb of such affection as their men lavished upon favorite horses.

None of the men who had ridden through the wild waters of Kimbrough's Crossing, since her blooming figure had announced her approaching womanhood, had been at all like Steve Clay. They had been a rough lot; hard men, course men, with crude and lusty appetites. And Kimbrough had never charged *them* with responsibility and consequences for the acts those appetites might prompt. But he had made it plain to Elva what *her* lot would be if ever he should have the slightest suspicion of her conduct. And that was the story of her adolescence; hungering for a love she could trust while becoming practiced in elusiveness. And when elusiveness failed in savage self-defense.

But Steve Clay was different! In him, at last, she had found a man who was not just another Indian under white skin and beard, like her father; she had found a man who did not look upon a woman as merely another pleasure, a possession, a trifle—to be bought, traded for, or stolen. And then cast aside, whenever the trail beyond beckoned.

A fierce hope of escape had smouldered within her since her mother's early death. It was fully alive now.

When she had served the noon meal, Elva slipped from the kitchen and left the dishes for Kimbrough's squaw; but knew they likely would be waiting when she returned. Right now, however, she had an urgent need to get away for awhile.

Outside the corral she paused, looking the horses over; and because she felt a kinship with wild, rebellious things, her eyes sought the wildest one among them. Before this choice could be made, sound came to her of hard ridden horses approaching. Because that usually meant Buck Lightfoot, she hurried in search of hiding and almost before she reached it Lightfoot raced into the ranchyard with his bunch. He reined up hard before the house and dust quickly billowed; then lazily drifted away as it settled.

From his saddle, impatiently holding his horse up, Buck Lightfoot called, "Kimbrough!"

Kimbrough's gruff voice came from the open door of the house. "Come on in."

Lightfoot stepped down and went to the door. His men quit their saddles and sprawled down here and there in the shade. Their foam-flecked horses blew trail dust from their nostrils and dragged breath deeply in, then let it slide out sighing, as if with great relief. They slouched immediately into various hip-shot stances of resting.

As Lightfoot came in through the door, Kimbrough looked up from his place at the head of the table. "Have you et?"

Lightfoot glanced around at the crew and when none of them looked up with dislike or challenge, he said, "Sure."

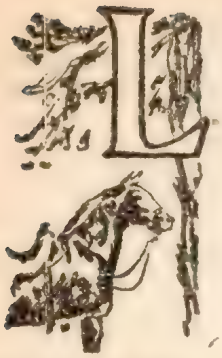
"Well, what's on your mind?"

"Hunter," Lightfoot said.

"What about him?"

"He's in town with his whole crew. And about one hundred head of his choice heifers are in the holding pasture at the ranch."

7



LUKE HUNTER had been riding with Bob Blake and Charlie Dodge, a little ahead of Joe Duncan and the range crew. In the middle of the first broad valley south of McCurdy, he reined up and the rest of the crew circled around.

When they were all there, he said, "I have a job for every man of you that wants to earn some fighting wages. If anyone hasn't got the guts for it, now is the time to ride on to the ranch."

The cowhands glanced at Joe Duncan, but Joe was interested in the rawhide lash of his quirt and asking no questions.

Charlie Dodge finally asked, "Where's this fight coming off?"

Hunter said, "We're going to wipe out Kimbrough."

Bob Blake chuckled mirthlessly. "He ain't liable to appreciate that; it might take some considerable hard wiping."

Hunter looked sharply at him. "Are you afraid?"

"Don't sound like a fool!" Blake said coldly.

"You trick him outside that log house," Charlie Dodge suggested indifferently; "we'll do the rest."

Hunter looked at them for a moment with open hatred for the superiority they felt and made no effort to conceal. With poor grace he said, "I'll do better than that. I brought a new man with me from Texas; he's in a hide-out camp where he can keep an eye on the Crossing. I wouldn't be surprised if he can't tend to this job single-handed."

Blake looked at Dodge with an open wink and their skeptical amusement increased Hunter's irritation. He reined his horse around and led out.

They picked up the new man before they reached the Crossing and when they came to the river, went into it and across and came out on the north shore cold and wet and short-tempered. Hunter pulled his boots back on and remounted and glanced about at the others. He said, "The dogs will give us away before we get much closer. We'll need a man to get inside and get the drop on them. I have the pass-word that newcoming outlaws are given in hideouts south of here. One man can get inside on the pretext of needing a meal."

Charlie Dodge turned his head until he found the new man among them and gravely looked at him. "Too bad they know all the rest of us."

The Texan coolly returned Charlie's gaze. "What's the word?"

A wry smile moved slowly across Charlie Dodge's hard face.

* * *

KIMBROUGH straightened and pushed away from the supper table as the dogs outside began a sudden uproar. For a moment he listened intently. Then he said, "Someone coming!" He stood up and leaned over the table to cup one hand about the top of the lamp chimney. He blew sharply and immediately darkness washed through the room. Only a bed of coals glowed in the fireplace.

Somewhere nearby a horse cleared his nostrils by blowing out sharply. After that the squeak of saddle-leather came to them. Someone called, "Hello the house. Have you got a bait of buckshot stew for a hungry traveler?"

"Buckshot stew," George Evans said quietly.

"He has the word, all right," Kimbrough agreed, slowly. He went to the door and lifted the bar and opened it enough to peer out. The newcomer thumbed a match aflame and lifted it to his cigarette so that his face was revealed by its light.

Kimbrough let a silence run before he finally said, "Rest your saddle." He kept to the shelter behind the door and followed the

sounds of the rider's dismounting and approach. Then a shadow appeared in the doorway, outlined by the stronger light outside. The newcomer hesitated.

"Come on in," Kimbrough gruffly said. The man's head jerked toward him, startled by the nearness of his voice. *Jumpy,* thought Kimbrough. Impatiently he repeated, "Come on in!"

The stranger stepped on in and Kimbrough closed the door and dropped the bar. He turned and saw the shape of the fellow in the darkness and said, "Go on over to the table."

The rider shifted uneasily upon his feet. "Haven't you got any light in here?"

"What's the matter—afraid of the dark?"

"No, but—"

Kimbrough waited for his reason and when the fellow let the silence run he finally said, "You act as guilty as an egg-sucking pup! What's the matter?"

The rider stood his ground and kept quiet; when Kimbrough knew he was going to say nothing, he asked, "What about him George?"

Evans said, "This ain't the homiest place to ride into after dark, Hank; I think he'll do."

Kimbrough thought on this for a time and finally said, "All right—make a light."

A match flared and Evans gingerly lifted the hot lamp chimney and put fire to the wick. As the feeble light pushed the shadows into the west end of the room, Kimbrough again turned to the newcomer, one hand outstretched, and said, "You can check your gun until you're ready to ride on."

One bushy eyebrow jerked up with surprise when he saw the fellow's hand raise with a gun already in it, muzzle foremost. He glanced toward the table and found his men greedily gathered around the *son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack,* caught more flat-footed than he was. "Didn't any of you poor greenhorns keep a gun on this maverick?" he bellowed.

The stranger moved the barrel of his gun suggestively. "Get over there closer to the others, grandpaw!"

Kimbrough struck at him with a bonebreaking blow that caught the rider on the right jaw. It floored him. "I ain't your grandpaw, damn you!" the old man raged. He leaped across the space between and reached down for the man. As his fingers closed, the rider jerked his gun up and fired. Kimbrough grunted but did not pause; he lifted the fellow with one hand, tore the gun from him with the other and turned it on him.

Evans and the other two rushed forward to help, but the concussion of the second shot mushroomed through the room and Kimbrough dropped the limp body at his feet before they could reach him. They stopped and for a moment were unmoving, waiting uneasily while he ignored them. He put a hand to his side and winced; He brought it away and it was covered with blood. He looked up. "A fine bunch of ninnies!"

"Is it bad?" George Evans asked.

Kimbrough seemed not to hear. "Get that light out!" he said harshly. "Someone must be not far behind that sidewinder. George and me will handle the front. You two cover the back."

HE HARDLY had said this when the dogs went wild again. Then the nearing thunder of many hoofs mounted above their uproar. Blackness washed through the room and Kimbrough found a porthole and began knocking out the dried mud with which it had been sealed.

Luke Hunter's voice raised outside. "Have you got them, Pasco?"

Kimbrough knocked the last of the mud out and snapped a shot at the sound.

Immediately Hunter yelled, "You're surrounded, Kimbrough! Walk out and stretch rope like a man, or we'll smoke you out."

Kimbrough snapped another shot at the sound of the voice and this time heard Hunter's yell of alarm

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that it would bring Steve into her arms. "I'm afraid there's no way you could reach Buck," she said; "I don't know just exactly where he is."

"Then what *can* I do?" Beth asked quickly.

Elva made her wait for the answer. Finally she said,"You know how the HL hates Buck."

Beth's fair brow gathered in a thoughtful frown and she seemed to be arguing something within herself. "I know how everyone *thinks* HL hates him."

"What do you mean?" Elva asked suspiciously.

Beth did not answer quickly but still seemed to be weighing something very carefully. "I'm afraid not to tell you this, for fear it may in some way be important to Steve's safety," she began quietly at last. "I don't know whether it has an significance, or not—but Buck and Joe Duncan were in Luke's room together for a good while, yesterday. I walked in on them when I went to tell Duncan to get out of town and stay out."

Elva thought on this and a great satisfaction moved through her. This was the spur she had needed to goad Hunter's hatred of Lightfoot. She was careful to keep her inward excitement out of her voice and said, "That was Duncan. I want word sent to HL that Hunter himself will be in town tomorrow morning. I hear you've put them on the Injun list, but it may mean Steve's life if you won't tell them that's called off for tomorrow."

"It sounds as though you have plans that may get someone killed."

Irritation flashed in Elva's dark eyes. "Does that matter as long as it isn't Steve?"

"I would just hate to see it happen, that is all," Beth said. She was watching Elva closely. "You love him, don't you?"

Elva swallowed deeply. "Too much to take time talking about it right now; do you?"

Beth smiled wryly at this. "I will have the word sent," she said softly. "I still wish you would let me try talking to Buck first, though."

Elva's eyes sharpened and she said, "Your part is to have the HL crew in here by sunup; let me worry about the rest!" She took one last long look at Beth, seeing her dress now and envying her in it. Then she turned quickly to the door.

16

STEVE CLAY flattened himself against the nearest canyon wall, the reins of the empty bridle still in his hand. The sound of the stampeding bronc sounded sharply, even above the uproar of gunfire. Someone shouted, "He's getting away!"

Men raced for their horses, purposefulness evolving instantly from the melee of the previous moment. Within another minute all but the one whose horse had bolted were in the saddle. They went past the place where Clay hugged the canyon wall. compactly bunched, and their horses were already running.

Clay waited until the sound of the hoofbeats quieted in the distance and then moved toward the lone man who now was gathering the scattered coals of the fire and piling fresh brush upon the blaze. He waited until the fellow straightened from the chore before he said, "Cool, isn't it?"

The breed jumped with a startled grunt as if he had been touched by something hot. He wheeled around and his mouth dropped open when he saw Clay standing there, looking at him with a ready gun. A little gold crucifix dangled on a fine chain around his neck and here and there the rays of firelight caught upon it and burst into tiny blossoms of bright flame.

"Here is your bridle," said Clay. "I'll trade it for your gun." He dropped the bridle and stepped in with his gun cocked and lifted the other man's gunbelt. Its ammunition might come in handy. He stepped back with it and caught the bridle on his toe and gave it a toss that sent

it to the breed's feet. The fellow looked at it and then glanced back at Clay and with his eyes upon Clay's gun he let his knees bend slowly and reaching down picked up the bridle. He bunched it in his hand and wrapped the reins around it and tied them fast and then glanced away from Clay long enough to turn and throw the balled bridle with all his might toward the top of the nearby canyon wall. He looked back at Clay then and his eyes were still expressionless.

But Clay chuckled, for the first time in hours, and said, "So it would give you away to the others when they got back!" When the fellow had nothing to say to that, Clay asked, "Anything to eat?"

The buck grunted and turned a thumb toward a saddlebag near the fire. "Jerky!"

Clay moved around to this and picked it up and threw the bags across his shoulder. He faced slowly back into the shadows with it, closely watching the Lightfoot man until he came to the place from which he had launched his attack. The breed sat down cross-legged before the fire and otherwise showed no inclination to move. Clay turned quickly up the canyon and found his tired bronc.

He came back to the confluence of the canyons and the breed did not glance up but stared into the fire as he went past and turned into the southwesterly branching canyon. He knew the fellow would keep the secret of his true escape rather than suffer the loss of face a telling of the story would mean to him Again Clay chuckled and a feeling of the sheer goodness of being alive refreshed him for a time.

Within half an hour, he came to the canyons end and again knew that awful feeling of being trapped. But the bronc, seeming to sense his need, nosed out a trail the wild ones climbed. They went slowly up it, the night almost pitch black about them. And coming to the top, found it like reaching the peak of a pyramid.

Perhaps the exhausted horse missed a turn, for with no warning the trail seemed to fall away into nothing. They plunged headlong in steep, crumbling slope. The fatigued pony was too weak for the blind fight and lost his footing. He started to roll and this threw Clay out into space.

Clay was gripped by the sickening sensation of falling, and then he hit water! The cold shock of it kept him moving so that he scrambled out of the way of the bronc and barely missed the thrashing hoofs.

When the world stopped its crazy spinning, he heard the horse struggling to get up, then sink back with a long groan. He knew he would walk if he traveled any farther that night. By the time he was steady on his own feet, the bronc tried once more to get up and this time made it.

Clay spoke to the horse and reached out and found him. The exhausted animal's muscles were quivering from over-exertion. Clay thought, *Where to from here?* And as if Elva were there speaking to him again, her words came to him: *You will be safe at the head of Lost Spirit Creek, the first stream west of here.*

He groped for the bridle reins and found them and turned up the stream. He began sloshing along in the midst of it, leading the shambling horse behind him. It would be days before that horse could carry a man again.

* * *

LUKE HUNTER opened his eyes and found the stars still shining in the sky above, but Jim was moving about the campfire already, making breakfast. "Why the hell can't you act human, whether you are or not, and sleep a little bit and let me sleep?" Hunter complained sharply. "You ain't going anywhere, are you, you damn hillbilly?"

Jim pretended not to hear, going on about the breakfast work. His very silence seemed to anger Hunter. "Don't burn that meat until it's like bootleather," he goaded gruffly, determined to get a response.

But the Kimbrough man did not respond. That rankled more than

anything he could have said. Again Hunter tried to bait him. "Don't know what a real fried potato looks like, do you?" But Jim continued to ignore him.

He made a final try. "Don't be afraid to put a little pepper in that paste you call gravy!" But for all Jim seemed to hear Hunter might not have existed; with disgust the captive rancher slumped back upon his bed.

When the food was ready, Jim filled a tin plate and brought it to Hunter. The handcuffs which Clay had left on the captive, holding his arms behind his back, had made spoon-feeding necessary. Jim had endured the chore and the verbal abuse that went with it for two days now.

As he neared, Hunter straightened to resume the battle. But Jim suddenly reached and caught him by the hair at the knap of his neck and jerked his head forward, slamming it down into the plate. When he let Hunter go, the rancher's mustache and face were well garnished with fried potatoes and gravy. Jim put the plate with what food remained in it upon the ground before Hunter and said, "You won't get your face no more messed up than it is, so get down on your belly and eat like a dog—or go hungry. And I'll kick your teeth in and stomp your head off if you give me one more cross word. So help me!"

Hunter glared at him, but uttered not one word. And Jim went back to the fire to enjoy his first meal in two days. He was finishing when Elva's signal whistle sounded in the canyon below. He stood up, wondering at this, and whistled back. A couple of minutes later she rode in.

She waved gaily as she reined up and then saw Luke Hunter and immediately her mood changed to concern. She vaulted from the saddle and ran forward and stopped before the rancher, looking down. She glanced around at Jim wide-eyed. "What have you been doing to him?"

Jim stared at her nonplused. Before he could answer, she went to the camp outfit and got a cloth and wet it in the nearby spring. She went back to Hunter and began washing his face. When she had done this, she seated herself beside him and began forking his food to him. He got a bite or two before his curiosity overpowered his desire to be unapproachable. "What is up now?"

"I want to make a deal with you."

Hunter brightened visibly, then turned wary. "On the level?"

Elva nodded. "Joe Duncan and Buck Lightfoot have teamed up against you," she began slowly, watching him carefully. "Beth McCurdy will tell you. She found them hatching plans in your hotel room the day before yesterday. Yesterday Duncan took your outfit over. He has your two gunfighters prisoner and framed with murdering Angus McKnight. The others of your Bearpaw Pool are knocking off Sunday to help him hang them. Turnbull and Coburn seem to like the idea of Lightfoot and Duncan taking your HL over."

"Damn that breed!" Hunter said in a harsh whisper. "So he told them! And now he and Joe think they've rustled themselves an outfit, do they?" He fell into a brooding quiet for a moment and then slowly said, "Joe isn't smart enough to have figured out such a scheme, but I'll kill him too!"

Elva laughed at this. "Not unless you work with me, you never will."

He glanced sharply at her. "What's your deal?"

She paced back and forth before him a time or two, making a ceremony of her deliberation, and then stopped and looked directly down at him and said, "Joe will be in town with your crew this morning. I've sent two men to fix the guards he left with your gunfighters, so they should meet you on the south side of the Crossing."

Impatience was riding Hunter hard, now, and he made no attempt to hide it. "So?" he prompted sharply.

"So pick up your men in town and take a ride with me," Elva said. "Lightfoot is up to a piece of business I want stopped; you may even be able to wipe him out."

"Why?"

She studied him a moment and then slowly said, "Because he has Steve Clay box-canyoned. And I don't want that ranger hurt."

"But Clay is after my hide!"

"I'll take care of that. I'll get him out of the country. He loves me; I'll handle him!"

Hunter put this together and carefully considered it and finally nodded. "It's a deal!"

Immediately she knelt beside him. "We will have to hurry," she said and loosed him from the handcuffs.

* * *

IT WAS NOT yet noon when they came to Kimbrough's. Elva reined up. "I'll see you at the ferry crossing when you've picked up your crew."

Hunter nodded and went on toward the ford without pausing. He crossed and came out of the river on the south side and Bob Blake and Charlie Dodge rode from the cottonwoods to meet him. "Duncan has taken over," Blake said immediately. "We was due to stretch rope."

"I know," Hunter cut him off abruptly. "We can talk later." He went on toward McCurdy without pause and the gunmen fell in behind. As they neared town, he turned from the trail and came in across vacant lots. He pulled up in the alley behind the hotel and impatiently waited while Charlie Dodge made a scout.

Dodge came back to report, "Most of the crew is at the saloon. Joe is on the hotel gallery." He looked at Hunter more closely before he asked, "Shall I get him for you?"

Hunter shook his head. "I'll tend to that!" His lips felt dry suddenly. He thought how good a drink would taste. Then he knew he must get this thing done quickly. He stepped down and handed his reins to Blake and glancing briefly at them, said, "Give me time to go through the hotel. Then ride around and help convert those cowhands, when I've finished with Joe." He turned quickly from them and went to the hotel back stair and up it.

As he started along the upper hallway, a drummer came from his room. He gave Hunter a curious glance and then went on. Hunter slowed his pace and inwardly congratulated himself as he watched the fellow go. Any curious eyes below that might glance up when the stairs began their creaking would see the drummer coming down and probably lose interest.

The other man was half way down when Hunter came to the head of the stair. Through the big window below, he saw Joe loafing on the gallery outside. He forgot his feeling of need for a drink. Cold satisfaction moved through him and he went down quickly and across the lobby and through the door. Duncan glanced idly across his shoulder at the sound of the door opening. He straightened immediately and came around with surprise and welcome in his eyes, one hand outreaching.

But Hunter's gun was in his hand. Before Duncan could speak, before he could comprehend his peril, Hunter raised the gun and fired!

* * *

STEVE CLAY opened his eyes to the soft light of evening. He lay looking up while a pair of minutes passed, slowly remembering and finding within himself a vast disinclination ever to move again.

He became aware of a crackling sound like that of burning brush, and then smelled smoke. Slowly he turned his eyes, searching for it. He found Elva, back to him, only a few yards away. She was busily cooking something and the smell of that came to him now and instantly he was famished. He started up—and hardly moved. He found himself almost too stiff to move. He thought, What must that poor cayuse be like!

Elva turned. She smiled at finding him awake and in Clay's eyes she was beautiful. Her hair was brushed and combed until it shone and fell in soft natural curls. She wore a bright new shirt for a blouse and a beaded, hand-worked riding skirt of soft doe skin. She wrinkled her

nose at him and said, "Sleepy head! I thought you never were going to wake up."

"I died," Clay said and tried to chuckle and found his voice rough with hoarseness.

Elva shook her head and this set the long black curls to dancing. "Not quite, thank goodness! But I almost did, when my man brought word about the jackpot you were in last night."

Clay smiled wryly. "I wasn't a bit sleepy then." He looked at her carefully, liking what he saw and reluctant to do more toward rousing himself. After a time he asked, "When did you get here?"

"Not long ago. I figured you might be ready to eat."

He slowly closed his eyes and slowly opened them again and still looking at her said, "Always looking out for me. I guess there is no paying all I owe you."

She leaned over him and lightly ran a finger across his lips and then put the hand upon his whiskered cheek caressingly. "Any other girl would gladly have done as much—if she'd had the same chance."

Clay softly said, "I wonder." And after a moment's pause he asked, "Can we get to Larb Crossing tonight?"

Elva glanced sharply at him. "Why?"

He chuckled quietly and raising a hand, cupped it under her chin. "I know you won't approve of this—but, for one thing, I hear there is a circuit rider there. So can we?"

She was not quick to give her answer. Buck Lightfoot and his bunch were somewhere out there between this place and Larb Crossing. So too, now, was Luke Hunter and his HL outfit. After a time she nodded. "I brought a fresh horse for you. After dark we should have no trouble."

* * *

Buck Lightfoot waved his scouting outriders in, as evening began to rise into the sky. Clay's trail had simply vanished. "He didn't have much grub," Buck said, when the others had gathered. "We will have to try and head him off at the nearest place he might try for supplies."

"That's Larb Crossing," one among them said.

Buck nodded. "Let's go." He put spurs to his tired horse and led out. Full night had gathered before they came to the river and found the lights of Larb Crossing twinkling beyond. He rang the bell for the ferry and when it came asked the boatman, "Has anyone else crossed lately?"

"Not since a freight outfit, about noon."

When they came to the south shore. Lightfoot put a twenty dollar gold piece in the skipper's gnarled hand. "Keep the change," he said. "And forget where you got it if anyone else gets curious."

"Thank you, sir!" the riverman nodded. "I'll do that."

Lightfoot led his men into the town. It was a larger settlement than McCurdy. He reined in at the first saloon. To a man nearby he quietly said, "Cash, you and Blackhawk take the horses on up south of town. As soon as we eat, I'll send relief. And remember—he likely would make a scout before he slipped in, if he comes. So keep out of sight."

The others followed him into the saloon, stringing along the bar, and began drinking to sharp thirsts. When that was done, he led them across the street to the hotel for supper. He paused on the gallery, after his men had gone inside, and again examined the street. An old white-bearded man was rocking at the left of the lobby door and was the gallerys lone occupant. Lightfoot glanced sharply at him and then dismissed him and went inside.

He came to one of his men and said, "Lynx, you drift back down into the shadows around the crossing and keep an eye open."

* * *

At the crossing, Luke Hunter and his men had ridden up on Lightfoot's backtrail on the north side in time to hear the clatter of hoofs as the breed bunch left the ferry. There was no way to bring the boat back but by ringing the bell, which might warn Lightfoot. Hunter quickly accepted this and turned his horse toward the ford.

One of the Kimbrough men who had come as guides spoke up when he saw this. "I reckon we will leave you here," he said.

Hunter nodded without glancing back and over his shoulder said, "Much obliged." He spurred his tired horse into the river and the cowhands strung out behind, with the gunfighter pair bringing up the rear.

Hunter led them out on the south side and dismounted. He left one man with the horses and sent five circling to find Lightfoot's horse bunch. Two others went toward the back of the livery stable to make certain no one found a horse there to flee upon. And he took Blake and Dodge with him, each of them carrying a double-barrelled shotgun.

As they neared the foot of the main street, a man came down it toward them. Hunter stopped and when the approaching man was a little nearer he said, "He's one of them!"

Dodge handed his shotgun to Blake and took a forward step, saying, "This is a job for—" He brought out a long-bladed knife.

17

CHARLIE DODGE took three more long forward strides and then waited. When the oncoming man was the proper distance, he flexed his arm sharply and sent the knife flashing. It buried itself to the hilt in the breed's throat and he crumpled without knowing what had struck him.

"So it *was* you that got McKnight," Hunter said, with no reproach as he watched Dodge retrieve the knife.

"We thought he might know something about you, after the way that girl threw in with the ranger," Blake explained casually. "But the big fool's head was too hard. I almost bent my gun barrel but didn't knock him out and he began giving us trouble. Charlie had to finish it before he finished us."

Hunter chuckled dryly. "Let's just be sure we don't muff this job. That breed came from the hotel. One of you take the back way."

Dodge took his gun from Blake and raised his hand to them in parting and moved into the darkness alone. Blake went slowly on with Hunter until they came to the lobby door. Hunter paused there, glancing down at the graybeard in the rocker. "Get up the street, Grandpap."

The old man immediately stopped his rocking and raised a resentful glance of stubbornness. Then he saw their shotguns an his eyes widened. He raised himself from the chair quickly and hobbled away.

Inside, Buck Lightfoot had caught the murmur of a voice and heard the rocker squeaking abruptly quiet. He was moving toward the door to investigate when he heard someone entering. His men were sprawled about the dining room, some in chairs at the tables and some stretched upon the floor, resting; all feeling the hard riding of the past two days.

Then Luke Hunter appeared in the archway from the lobby, shotgun in his hands, and an electric-like current of alarm seemed to flash through the room. Men everywhere were diving for cover. And Lightfoot drew frantically, not understanding this but certain from the look of Hunter that he had come for a killing.

A big lamp hung from the center of the ceiling, and Lightfoot brought it crashing down and the roar of Hunter's first shot covered the lighter report of his shot. A hot buckshot grazed his left ribs as he threw himself sideways to the wall. He heard the crash of the front window and knew someone had come in that way. Almost immediately another shotgun bellow shook the room. Its deadly charge swept the room and a man screamed as buckshot tore him.

Lightfoot raised his gun to fire

at the muzzle-flash, then faltered, knowing his gun would in turn betray his position. Hunter was somewhere nearby with his shotgun.

He heard his men jumping up and rushing through the darkness in confusion. Tables were overturned, whether being stumbled into or where men were forting-up behind them, he did not know. Here and there a six-gun barked, but they were making no organized resistance yet. And then two double-barrelled volleys roared across the room together. The concussion seemed to make the very walls tremble.

Immediately there were shrill cries of mortally wounded men. Lightfoot heard this and his mouth became as dry as the mouth of a man feeling thirst upon a desert. He had his gun up, hoping for some betraying sound of Hunter. But there was no place in that room for small sound.

Another shotgun bellowed and wood splintered as the body of the charge smashed into a tabletop or the far wall. This time its outspread fingers of Death seemed to find nothing. But before its echos were gone, another followed. And Lightfoot heard Death come to some man. heard the rough, tearing impact of lead as it ripped through cloth, smashed flesh and bone. He heard the sharp grunting gasp and the rattling sigh that followed.

Others had heard it too, and had taken all of this they could. Men everywhere seemed as one to pick themselves from the floor, from their places of inadequate protection, and rush for the kitchen door—slugging and cursing and crashing into one another. Tables and chairs went down before the violence of their rush.

Someone got the door open and immediately another shotgun began raining wholesale death into their midst from the kitchen. A sickness, a beginning of terror, gripped Lightfoot's vitals as he realized how hopelessly they were trapped. And then the guns behind again joined in, the men carrying them moving forward to finish the carnage at close range.

The cry of Death filled the place and Lightfoot knew now where Hunter was, but a palsied sickness had seized him. He tried to level his gun, but could not hold it steady. It seemed suddenly useless to try to fight against anything so hopeless.

The shotguns were firing in rotation now, making a steady thunder. And the cry of his men, as they were torn apart, turned through him like a rusty blade. As if from afar he heard a voice protesting, "It can't be! It can't be!" And then realized it was his own. More than anything else, he wanted to get out of that room, get beyond hearing of its terror, get out where his ears could escape that awful cry. He must get out!

The acrid stench of burned gunpowder filled his nostrils and he seemed unable to get his breath. He started crawling toward the lobby doorway. He reached it and raised to his feet and dodged through.

Quickly he searched the lobby darkness and found no hint of danger there. He went on to the outer door and glanced into the street. The lights were out throughout the whole town. The place lay under an eerie shroud of unbroken darkness. He slipped out and began to move up the street, keeping close to the buildings.

The thin sound of pistol fire came down the street abruptly from some distant place and immediately he knew some of the HL outfit were after the horses. He felt the desperation of a saddleman caught afoot and almost forgot the other danger. He heard the nearing sound of a running horse and dashed into the middle of the street to try and head the animal.

One of Hunter's men at the livery heard this too and ran out as Lightfoot was passing. They saw the shape of one another about the same time, but Lightfoot knew the other man could be only an enemy and fired first.

He ran on with no thought of hav-

ing killed a man. An instant later a cry raised behind him. "One of them has got away!" And he gave no thought to this either because the fleeing horse had materialized from the darkness before him. He grabbed at his hat to wave, then realized he had lost it. Quickly he fired into the street before the bronc, in an effort to slow his charge, and the pony shied violently but tried to dodge on past. Lightfoot lunged at his head and caught the bridle bit by the shanks and held on. He stopped the bronc roughly and vaulted into the saddle. The frightened horse again tried to stampede on toward the river and his home range in the badlands beyond. But Lightfoot pulled hard on one rein and forced him to come around.

The bronc hit the walk, hoofs clattering upon the boards. He slammed into the side of a building and Lightfoot jerked his leg up in time to avoid having it crushed. The bronc dodged on into an alleyway along the side of the building. Beyond the rear of the building he stumbled through a collection of junk, but kept goin, headed east. And Lightfoot let him run.

* * *

STEVE CLAY and Elva came to the Larb Crossing ferry landing and he gave several sharp tugs on the signal bell rope. Before the echoes had quieted, they heard the heavy bay of a shotgun as it reached across the new night from somewhere in the town beyond. Others sounded behind it and the uproar became one continuous roll for some moments.

Immediately after the first shot the lights everywhere in town were put out and watching this from across the river, they saw a deathly pall of unbroken blackness engulf the town. Through this raised the cries of dying men.

"It sounds bad over there," Clay said and glanced at Elva. She kneed her horse in closer and reached out to touch his hand.

In a voice so low he almost did not catch her words, she said, "You won't have to worry about Buck Lightfoot any more."

He looked at her more closely. "What do you mean?"

"I mean—" She faltered, realizing almost too late how he might react to news of Hunter being on the loose. "I mean I think Buck has ridden in there, figuring you might show up," she quickly covered. "And it sounds like maybe Joe Duncan finally caught up with him."

Clay made no comment on this and when the shooting ended he again rang the bell; loudly. The ferry was even then some time in coming. They watched as lights began to blossom again throughout the town, and heard the ringing hoofbeats raised by a body of horsemen riding quickly out. After that an almost normal peacefulness and quiet descended.

When the ferry finally came at long last the old riverman was so excited he could hardly manage it alone. "Such a killing you never seen!" he exclaimed, his breath going noisily in and out. "If that don't stir up some wanting after real law and order, nothing will. Why—I seen Injun massacres in my time. And they wasn't in it with this, for bloody!"

Clay helped him with the boat and they managed to get across. When Clay had paid, they rode on into town. Lights and people were everywhere. The whole population of the town seemed to be gathered in the street before the hotel. Clay reined up behind the crowd and caught the eye of a man nearby. "What happened?"

"An outfit caught that cowthief Lightfoot, and his bunch," the townsman answered. "Rubbed them out clean!"

Immediately Elva asked, "They got Buck Lightfoot too, did they?" Clay glanced at her and saw the unmasked eagerness in her eyes. A finger of disquiet touched him because he knew the canker that would grow from ever wishing death to any man so keenly.

The townsman said, "I head Lightfoot himself got away. But if he

did, he was about the only one!"

Elva turned quickly to Clay. "Let's go in and see."

Before she could swing down he grabbed her arm. His voice was tired as he said, "You hold my horse, I'll have a look."

He shouldered through the curious and came to the gallery. A man was slumped beside one of its posts, retching. "That bad?" Clay asked. The fellow only moved his head from side to side and groaned.

Behind, a wag somewhere in the crowd called, "Only strong stomachs can stand venturing into that dining room!" A ripple of hushed laughter quickly raised and quickly died.

INSIDE Clay found the owner of the hotel and several others standing around the lobby with unbelieving horror still in their widened eyes. Clay asked, "Who was it?"

"Hunter's bunch, from east of McCurdy," the proprietor answered sharply.

"Who was leading them?"

The hotel man gave Clay a glance edged with irritation. "Why Hunter, of course!"

"You mean Joe Duncan, don't you?"

The townsman became openly indignant. "I reckon maybe I know Luke Hunter when I see him—damn him. He sure wrecked this place!"

Clay turned from him and went toward the door of the dining room. The proprietor's irritated voice came sharply after him. "Stay out of there, if you want to keep on sleeping well!"

Clay went on in and the sight he found put new lines into his face and paled it. He recalled Lightfoot's mocking words as the fellow had defied him to shoot, the morning before at Kimbrough's, and thought: *So he wanted it neat!*

Something in a pool of blood upon the floor caught his eye, and reaching down he picked up a little crucifix dangling upon a fine gold chain. But it did not catch the light now, stained by its crimson bath; the brightest rays fell from it dully. Clay turned back to the lobby with it in his hand.

When he went back through the lobby, the hotel man was quick to see the change. "Couldn't take my word for it!" he taunted smugly. Clay went on to the door and outside as if he had not heard.

Outside, he went through the crowd with a strange roughness, hating such curiosity seekers and their morbid interest. He came to his horse and swung up. He took the reins from Elva without looking at her and started to turn his horse away, wanting to get out of there. But Elva caught at his sleeve. "Have you forgotten what we came for? Hadn't we better ask someone where—"

Clay looked at her with no expression in his eyes and said, "Luke Hunter seems to be on the loose; I think we had better get on to McCurdy." He held a hand toward her with the blood-stained crucifix dangling from the fingers. "Here's a keepsake for you."

Elva reached for it curiously and then glanced at him sharply, belatedly sensing something wrong in the tone of his voice. Then she turned from him quickly and with her stirrup nudged a man standing near. "Where does the circuit rider live around here?"

"Well I could tell you, but he ain't home," the fellow drawled. "The bunch that did the shooting grabbed him and took him along. Said something about there going to be a wedding at McCurdy, tonight."

* * *

BETH McCURDY was trying to outwalk her anxiety, pacing the floor between her two bedrooms, when suddenly the voice of one of her newly recruited cowboy guards, tense with restrained excitement, came through the open window. "Miss Beth! Miss Beth! There's a bunch—"

The voice trailed off abruptly in a sighing gasp. Beth started toward the window, then stopped, suddenly afraid. But if there was danger out there, that window should be closed. She started on. But before she

reached the window, the hallway door unexpectedly opened. She turned and saw Luke Hunter there. Her eyes widened at the change she immediately sensed in him. He came in and closed the door. For the first time she felt uneasy before him; there was a fierceness about him that had never been.

Perhaps it was because of the narrow-eyed, calculating way in which he stood there looking at her. She strove to hide the shudder that raced through her. After a time he seemed to lose interest. Looking away, he saw Ting. "Who is that?"

Beth mustered some of her old tartness. "A man Pete Long shot!"

"He's that ranger's partner, isn't he?" Hunter charged, and did not wait for her answer but looked at Ting and asked, "What is your name, kid? You look familiar."

Ting pulled himself up straight against the headboard of the bed. "Maybe you have been seeing someone like me in your sleep," he suggested. "The name is O'Banion!"

Hunter reached for his gun and slowly drew it. His eyes had not moved from Ting. He chuckled mirthlessly. Beth gasped and threw herself at him. She took him off guard and knocked his gun from his grip. He jerked the hand from her and swung, striking Beth with a backhanded blow that staggered her. She came up against the bed and hung there, staring incredulously at him.

Again Hunter chuckled. "That is no way to act with the man you are going to marry! I brought the parson from Larb Crossing with me. I told you that one day I would be strong enough I'd just not bother asking you about the marrying business. Tonight you're going to see it happen."

"Why—why I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth and I had to be an old maid ten thousand years!"

Hunter smiled wryly. "You'll marry me tonight, just the same. This town has to be with me when I start some more expanding. You have to take Joe Duncan's place until then—keep those syndicates off my back until I'm ready for them. You may as well make it easy on yourself."

"I'll kill myself before I'll let you use me to shield your dirty work!"

Hunter watched her curiously for a moment, then shrugged. He took a step toward Ting. "If you're going to be difficult anyhow, I'd just as well drag this redhead out and finish him, here and now!"

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BETH rushed Hunter. She went in close, driving with a fury he could not brush aside with a sweep of his hand. She knocked his hat off and buried a hand in his hair, entwining her fingers and jerking. She raked him from the ear to the point of his chin with the nails of her other hand. She kicked his shins and when he raised a hand to slap her aside, she caught the little finger in her teeth.

Hunter yelled and swung around frantically, sweeping Beth from her feet. She grabbed his cheek with her other hand and dug her nails in and clung to his hair and his flesh like a leech.

He stopped and shoved her away enough with the hand she had her teeth in so that he could get at her with his other fist. He caught her on the jaw and dazed her enough that her holds loosened. He hit her again, this time full on the mouth. She fell from him. Her lips were bleeding when she hit the floor.

Ting O'Banion was coming out of the bed behind Hunter with murder in his eyes, his thigh bullet-torn or not. But someone else had come into the room. A new voice called, "Here Luke! Look."

Buck Lightfoot sat half across the sill of the open window, his gun on Hunter. His gray eyes glittered almost insanely and when he had en-

joyed Hunter's unbelief and surprise he said, "I want you to see this coming. I'm going to kill you, and I want you to die hard!"

He pulled his other leg in and stood up. All other motion in the room had ended. He stepped to one side of the window and put his back to the wall and taunted, "It was easy, wasn't it Luke? Easy to kill fifteen men like sheep in a pen. And *this* is going to be easy too. For me! Not for you." He pulled the hammer back, enjoying the consternation and beginning of fear in Luke Hunter's eyes and reluctant to end it too quickly.

Words began tumbling from Hunter's lips. "See here, Buck! See here! You don't want to— Beth hasn't hurt you."

"A lot you're worried about her feelings," Lightfoot scoffed. "This won't hurt little Beth; do you think I didn't see what you were doing?"

He paused, wanting to stretch this to the full, and then said, "Where would you like to have this? In the guts, first? Or shall I start whittling an arm off—or a leg? You've got to enjoy this a long time to pay up for all you did at Larb Crossing."

Ting O'Banion broke in urgently. "That ought to listen good to me, but it doesn't. Let Miss Beth get outside or somewhere before you begin the operation."

Lightfoot glanced sharply at him. "You should have seen the mess he left at Larb Crossing!" But when he had thought on Ting's words a little he nodded. "I'll take him outside in the hall."

Hunter turned to the door and waited until Lightfoot directed him to move further. He paused at the door until Lightfoot was directly behind him, then opened it and with hands above his head went into the hallway. He started toward the lobby, but as Lightfoot cleared the doorway he dropped. A blast of buckshot drove at Lightfoot from the blackness of the lower hall and he dropped without one dying shot at Hunter.

Beth screamed and threw herself against the door, crowding Lightfoot's torn body on out, and slammed it. Hunter jumped up and turned back and drove against the door with his heavy shoulder. He bounced back. It was a thick door and would require more than a man's weight, more than flesh and bone, to batter open.

Blake appeared from the blackness of the lower hall, reloading his shotgun. "Let me use this on it," he suggested.

Hunter made a gesture of disgust and said, "Don't be a fool!" He went to the lobby to find something better, and Charlie Dodge hurried in from the street.

"Someone coming!" he said sharply.

This took Hunter's full attention. "The ranger?"

"I wouldn't know. But that damn racket won't help."

Hunter ignored the reproach. "Get up at the head of the stairs," he said. "He had a room there he may head for. If he comes this way, Blake and I will get him."

He waited until the protest of the stairs ended, when Dodge had mounted them, then went back to the door of Beth's apartment and grabbed one of Lightfoot's legs and dragged the body with him into the deep shadows beyond.

* * *

STEVE CLAY came into McCurdy from the south with Elva beside him. As they neared the deep shadows lying beneath the grove at the foot of the grade, a challenge came at them. He reined up and said, "It is Clay, the ranger. And Elva Kimbrough."

After a moment the voice asked, "Do you know anything about the shooting over on the west side a little while back?"

"Only a guess," said Clay. "It likely was Luke Hunter and his outfit coming in from Larb Crossing."

"We're supposed to keep them out of town!" the guard exclaimed, and then said, "Ride on in."

They went past him and through the grove and came to the head of

Trail Street. Here Elva crowded her bronc against Clay's. "Let me go on ahead!" she pleaded. "It might be Hunter, and he may be looking for you."

"Do you know of any reason why he wouldn't be looking for me?" asked Clay. "I'm still wondering how he got loose."

"Let me go in ahead!" she repeated.

"Was there some kind of a deal?" Clay persisted.

"Please!" Elva said sharply.

Clay shook his head. "If it *is* Hunter, I will have to take him unawares to ever get him. And the chance of that is much better right now than it may be again for a long time; if you went in ahead, it might tip him off."

He urged his horse on and went past her. Ahead, the only light in town showed at the foot of the street, reaching feebly into the outer night from Gagan's Bar and from the hotel. He rode toward it and let his tired horse pick his gait. His head moved warily from side to side as he went, searching the night with his hearing for some small sound of warning.

Somewhere ahead a gun boomed dully, the sound muffled by walls. Clay stopped a moment, but when there was no answering shot he let the reins fall slack and loosened his gun in its holster as the horse moved on.

Elva rode in beside him again to plead, "Let me go on ahead!" And this time he did not look at her or give her an answer. The intersection was before him and a sixth sense warned him something was about to break. If Hunter's men were already out there in the darkness, set and waiting, the odds were all against him.

He glanced at the saloon as they approached the weak beam of light falling to the edge of the street from its door. With the cards stacked as they were, the lighted barroom might offer him the best chance of an even fight. He handed his reins quickly to Elva and vaulted down. "I'll be in here," he said quietly. "Please take the cayuse on to the livery for me."

HE MOVED fast then, going to the saloon gallery. He glanced inside over the batwings. Behind him, Elva let her horse move slowly on, pacing him, shielding his back from attack.

He went inside and found the room completely deserted except for Gagan. He was perched upon a high stool at the foot of the bar with a quart before him. He jumped when Clay came through the batwings. Clay went down the bar until he faced Gagan across it and said, "Set out another glass, Barney."

Gagan heaved himself from the stool, his bloodshot little eyes wary and constantly moving. He put a clean glass before Clay and backed off. "You lost your taste for liquor?" Clay asked.

Gagan pointed a pudgy finger at the level in the bottle. "The rest is in me. I've had too much already!"

"Besides, a man can dodge better when he's on his feet," Clay suggested lightly. He picked up the bottle and measured a scant drink, then shoved it back. "Put it away, Barney. It might get busted!"

Across the street, Bob Blake slipped from the hotel and saw Elva going toward the stable with the led horse. He turned back immediately and called, "Boss! He's gone into the saloon."

Hunter came up from the lower hall and Dodge came down the stairs. "You two come along," Hunter said and went out upon the gallery. He paused there and finally said, "You hit the side-door, Charlie. Two of us will brace him from the front. You come in at the same time we do. Nail him in a cross-fire he can't dodge. I don't want any slips like with Lightfoot. That one almost got me killed! Let's go."

Inside the apartment, Beth and Ting strained their ears, following the movements of the men outside by the creaking of the floor boards. They heard them go out and after that began a quiet.

Ting struggled up and started

trying to get out of bed. "Where's my pants?" he cried. "Steve must have ridden in. They won't give him a chance!"

"Be quiet!" Beth hushed. "What could *you* do?"

"I could at least do some shooting to warn Steve so they can't surprise him. And I might get a chance to kill Hunter; having to lie to my folks, saying Steve did it, wouldn't worry me none if I did!"

"You stay quiet!" Beth said sharply. She ran to the closet where Ting's gunbelt had been put with his clothing. She grabbed the gun from the holster and rushed back to the hallway door.

"You can't move fast enough!" she said, when Ting raised a protest. "This is something I can do." She had the door unlocked and hurried out.

She reached the front door and saw Luke Hunter and another man waiting in the shadows outside the saloon door. She went out to the edge of the gallery and steadied the gun against a gallery post while she drew the hammer back, using both thumbs. Then she aimed in the general direction of the saloon and pulled the trigger.

The bullet ricocheted from something and whined away and the two men jerked around. For a moment Steve was safe; she fought the hammer back again, desperate to hold Hunter's attention.

INSIDE THE saloon, Clay glanced toward the front at the sound of the shot, then from the tail of his eye saw the side-door opening. He turned and drove two shots across the opening edge. The door was jerked shut and he went to it quickly and wedged a chair between the knob and the floor. He faced the front again.

Beth got the hammer almost back, but it slipped. The gun went off and almost jumped from her hands. This time the unaimed bullet splintered into an upright of the saloon gallery near Hunter's head. He dodged and turned back quickly to the door; rather than face more of Beth's wild shooting, he led the way inside.

Blake and Hunter separated the instant they were beyond the batwings, going to either side. They saw Clay behind the foot of the bar, partially shielded by it. They hesitated, expecting Charlie Dodge to come through the door behind Clay and make their setup fool-proof.

Elva had paused before the locked stable door. She glanced back at the sound of the first shot and saw the light of the side door come into the street and highlight a man stealthily entering. The two quick shots sounded and the fellow leaped back and slammed the door shut again. She jerked her carbine out and her first shot blended with a second from Trail Street. The man at the side door was all but lost to her in the shadows there now. She jumped her horse into a run toward him, firing twice as she closed in.

Inside, Steve Clay was not hesitating. He picked Blake for his first shot, knowing him the most deadly. The gunfighter realized his danger too late and jerked his shotgun up. It rained buckshot into the ceiling as he spilled loosely forward with Clay's bullet through him.

Hunter began cursing Dodge and sent a charge raking across the end of the bar where Clay had been. But Clay was moving. Before Hunter could drop the second hammer, before he could begin to follow Clay with his aim, the heavy gun seemed to explode in his hands. Lead from Clay's gun had hit it and torn it away, momentarily paralyzing Hunter's arms to the shoulders.

The chair wedging the side-door gave away before a frantic lunge by the man out there. Clay turned that way without time to reload. He sent his last shot through the heavy panel, before the door could swing open. He heard the man's cry as the mushroomed lead struck, and glanced forward again, seeking Hunter.

Blake stumbled back from the door, weakly cursing, shaken by the flattened slug that had hit him. Then he saw Elva's horse almost

upon him. He wheeled and ran, going into the night at a shambling run.

CLAY FOUND Hunter, aching arms hugged to himself, beginning to move toward the batwings. He snapped the cylinder of his gun out and got one fresh cartridge into a chamber and put it back. He raised the gun as Hunter pushed the batwings aside and dropped the fugitive there with a broken left knee.

Men were moving toward the saloon from all over town and an HL cowhand among them saw Hunter fall. "The boss got it!" he cried and turned back. "I'm getting out of here!"

Clay heard this as he began reloading and relief started through him. Then he heard the side-door again opening and turned with fresh alarm. But it was Elva. She rushed in with the carbine still in her hand. "Steve!" she said. "Oh Steve. Are you all right?"

Clay smiled and slowly nodded.

She looked past him and saw the body upon the floor at the front and Hunter's legs reaching in under the batwings. Her eyes brightened like a pleased child's. "You got him!"

Clay nodded gravely and she came to him and tried to throw her arms around him, but he moved aside and caught her by one arm. He took her with him to the dead man. When he stopped over the corpse and looked down, a compassion touched him as it always had when he looked upon a man dead at his hand. He said, "A dead man is never something to be glad about, girl." He watched her as he went on. "It is something fearful."

He paused, still watching her, and he knew that she had not comprehended so much as even the spirit of this thought, much less its meaning. But he went slowly on. "However bad the worst of such lives may be, Elva, they are no worse than the best of us might have been had we come from the same beginnings."

He realized then she was not even listening, not caring to comprehend, but was watching him worshipfully and waiting for him to turn his attention to her. And he knew then that she would never understand these thoughts of his that made his ranger work a bitter trail at times, and also a sacred duty. The blood-stained crucifix was at her throat, the fine chain around her neck now, and she was absently toying with it with the fingers of one hand, still as unconcerned and unaware of its significance to him as she was about the meaning of his words.

Because he did not know what else to say or do, he went to the batwings and dragged Hunter back inside and propped him against the wall. Townsmen began crowding in.

The glaze of shock and pain still dulled Hunter's eyes, but as they listlessly raised and crossed Elva's face, something seemed to revive him. He fastened his gaze upon her and began to curse in a low and terrible voice of pain and hatred. Clay saw this and glanced at her. "Why does he do that?"

Irritably she said, "He is crazy; you should have killed him!"

The hatred in Hunter's eyes intensified. "You should have killed him!" he mimicked and looked at Clay. "She didn't want you to know, you Gentle Annie. She planned it all! The whole shooting match, from start to finish."

"Planned it?" Clay asked, and glanced at Elva. "What is he talking about?"

"It's lies, Steve!" she said earnestly, sensing in Clay a beginning of active disapproval. "He's crazy. Make him shut up."

"Lies!" Hunter scoffed. "Us poor suckers don't know what real lying is. She used us like checkers. Turned me loose on poor old dumb Joe—"

"Shut him up, Steve!" Elva cried.

Clay was watching her soberly. "You turned him loose?"

"It was for you!" Elva said with exasperation. "You were trapped in the badlands and I—"

"She told me Joe and Buck were double-crossing me—"

Elva cut him off. "Shut up!" she said, and her voice began to rise hysterically. "Shut up, or I'll—" She jerked the muzzle of the carbine up and before Clay realized her intent, aimed at Hunter's head and pulled the trigger. "I guess *he* won't lie any more now!" she said with a childish satisfaction, then tardily realized what she had done glanced at Clay.

CLAY LOOKED away and a racking sob shook her. She dropped the gun and threw herself at him, catching him by the arms, trying to draw them around her. "You don't believe him, do you Steve? I didn't mean to kill him, but he was lying! He was trying to make you—"

"You had the handcuff key, Elva," Clay reminded. He was sick inside, still hardly able to believe this; but he knew the truth of all Hunter had managed to say, and of all he might have said. "I am sorry, Elva," he said. "Maybe you *should* have seen it at Larb Crossing."

She glanced directly at him. Perhaps she saw his pity for her. She stiffened and backed off a step and protested, "But I did it for you! Don't look at me that way."

When his eyes did not change, she again grabbed him by the arms, entreating, "Steve. Steve! Everything is all right, now."

He shook his head and looked away, unable to find any words to give her. He felt no censure toward her because he knew she was but a child of her beginnings.

Again he shook his head and said, "I am sorry, Elva; it just isn't in the cards for us—for you and me together."

She backed away from him, her eyes wide and unbelieving. "But he would have killed you!"

"It's not that!"

"Don't look at me that way, Steve! Don't look so—so holy! I suppose you've never killed a man. He was lying!"

"He was *not* lying, Elva—and you know it," Clay said wearily.

"It's that Beth!" Elva's eyes became accusing. The carbine was at her feet and she quickly stooped and picked it up. Somewhere within her restraint crumbled and unleashed a fury such as Clay had never seen. "After all I've done for you!" The breath of her words escaped with a sound like hissing. Clay turned away, sick and suddenly too tired to endure any more. He put his hands out and pushed aside the swinging doors and his weariness drove clear to his marrow.

Behind him Elva screamed hysterically, "I'll kill you too!" But he did not look back, did not even hear the rush of feet as townsmen closed in upon her; did not see Bill French gently take the gun from her before she could level it.

He came to the edge of the gallery and paused, feeling dumb with fatigue and wondering where to go. He raised his eyes and looked out across the dusty path of the street before him and then he saw Beth over there, watching him and waiting. He stepped into the street and started toward her without conscious decision.

Then he stood before her. And she stepped down into the street and came to him. The face she lifted to look into his eyes was still pale from fear and anguish for him, and on one cheek an undried tear still lingered. Because he could think of nothing better, he asked, "How is Ting?"

Beth's eyes smiled up warmly at him, then. "He is fine. He'll rest peaceful, now."

Clay cupped one hand under her chin and looked long into her eyes. After a time he smiled gravely and whispered, "Peaceful Beth." He raised his other hand to touch the goldenness of her hair and the graveness melted from his face.

She came into the hollow of his arms, then, and the weariness of his flesh and of his mind and spirit was turned to triumphant singing.

THE END

COFFIN FOR BUCK McKEE

by Lee Floren

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe thought they'd been through everything — until they found themselves being held up by a girl bandit . . .

THEY HAD left Grass City at about ten o'clock that night and, about three miles out of the gold-mad town, they had unrolled blankets in a clearing surrounded by *manzanita* bushes.

Tall Buck McKee was the first to awaken. His horse had warned him there was a prowler, human or animal, around the camp, for the horse had snorted loudly. Now Buck lay on his back, pistol under his blankets, and his right hand was on that pistol.

Not moving, he listened.

Dawn was sifting across the high Sierras and, although June was here, the dawn was still chilly at this high altitude. Five feet to his left lay the blanket-wrapped figure of his fat partner, Tortilla Joe.

Tortilla Joe lay on his broad back, mouth slack. For once he was not snoring. Buck heard his pony snort again and, without sitting up, he looked at their two cayuses, standing about fifty feet away. Both ponies had their ears extended. Both watched the brush behind Buck.

Buck had a sudden shiver creep along his spine. Down in Grass City he had heard about miners being robbed and killed for their gold. And while he and Tortilla were not miners...well, a bandit could make a mistake, you know.

Behind him a voice said, "Sit up, you two! And forget you have guns!"

Tortilla Joe sat up like a giant string had tugged him upward. "Buck, all the time you make the fool outa me! Your treecks they scare me to death—"

"This ain't no trick, fat man!"

Buck had not sat up; now he watched the big dark head of Tortilla Joe swivel, saw his partner's eyes go around with surprise. He glanced back at the bandit. A small, thin person, masked to the eyes, wearing levis and riding-boots. The bandit had on a silk shirt and a buckskin vest. "Sit up, you long drink of water!"

The bandit's gun made a gesture.

Tortilla Joe's voice held an awed surprise. "A girl, eh, Buckshot?"

Buck had been thinking the same thing; the bandit had the full-rounded form of a woman, and the bandit's hands were sleek and well-kept feminine hands. He could see about an inch of space between the top of the handkerchief mask and the edge of the bandit's hair. And that space held no whiskers, or blue trace of whiskers.

Under his blankets, his fingers came away from the .45. A man couldn't gun it out with a woman,

even if she did pull a cutter on him. He got to his feet, fully dressed except for his boots, and stood hands shoulder-high; Tortilla Joe, eyes still wide, followed suit.

"*Hola,* a girl, Buckshot!"

Buck said, "We heard you the first time." Then to the female bandit, "What'd you want, Miss?"

"A thousand dollars!"

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe and smiled. "She don't know us, does she, pard...

"She sure don't." The Mexican

spoke to the girl. "Mees, we ees broke, no? We no miners; we cowboys. We been down in the town of San Franceesco, an' no cowboy he come out of 'Freesco weeth any money."

"Shell out, men."

Buck kept watching the gun in her hand. He noticed the whiteness across her knuckles, like she was holding that gun with great determination. A gun, he realized, could kill a man, and it didn't care which man.

"What do you want a thousan' bucks for?" Buck wanted to know.

His answer was curt. "That's my business!"

Tortilla Joe said, "We no got the monies, Mees."

"Turn your backs to me. I'm gonna search you."

BUCK NOTICED that Tortilla Joe's holster was empty, too. The Mexican had taken his colt out of holster so he could sleep on his side. He turned his back to the girl, wondering just how he could get her gun.

He didn't know just how to go about fighting a woman. This was something new to him, but there must be some way. She handled that gun like she was so nervous she might be trigger-happy. And he didn't want a bullet in his back!

But how?

His eyes met those of Tortilla Joe's And the Mexican murmured, "Thees I does not onderstan', Buckshot. Thees girl she ees desperate, no?" Buck only nodded.

"Quit that talkin'," the girl snapped.

She tried to make her voice authoritive but Buck thought he detected uncertainty in it. She searched Tortilla Joe first, going through his pockets from behind. He had a pocket-knife, a few buttons, a dirty bandanna, and a dirty comb. She pocketed his wallet but Buck knew his partner only had five bucks or so in it.

They were almost broke. Their spree over in San Francisco, they had headed across toward Donner Pass, a few miles to the east, and they had aimed to go punching cows for old Jimmy Smith, over around Elko, Nevada.

Buck saw her look in the wallet. She put it in her pocket and came to him, saying, "All right, String Bean; your next."

"That gun loaded?" Buck asked.

"Sure it's loaded." She had her left hand in his pocket. "Want me to send a slug through your long carcass?"

"Didn't know whether or not it was loaded," Buck grunted.

He was sweating, he noticed, and he shouldn't have been, for the chill was still on the earth. He could feel her small hand in his pocket.

Tortilla said, "I theenk she keed us, Buck; that gon she ees not the loaded, I theenk."

Buck watched her eyes. Anger flared across them and she glanced toward Tortilla Joe, giving the lanky cowpuncher the moment he needed. He swung around, her hand in his pocket, and his motion, fast and unexpected, pinned her hand in the pocket. His right hand snaked out and had her wrist. A quick, hard twist, a little scream, and her gun fell. Sobbing, she sat down; Buck reached and had her gun.

Then there was silence except for her sobs.

Buck said, "Heck of a way to have to treat a young girl."

Tortilla shrugged. "But look how she treats us, Buckshot!"

Buck again got the impression she must have been in dire need of money to attempt such desperate measures. Sympathy for her was strong in him.

Tortilla Joe looked down at her, hardness now gone from his dark eyes.

Finally the girl's shoulders stopped their shaking. Her mask had slipped and when she looked up Buck saw a pretty little face, a mouth small and inviting. She was, he decided, a very lovely girl. About twenty, he guessed. "Ma'am," he drawled, "I'm sure sorry we had to trick you that-a-way."

"I'm a fool!"

Buck said, kindly, "Anybody who gits a gun to go out an' git the other fella's property or money is always a fool. But why did you try it?"

"That, sir, is my business!"

Except for the redness, her eyes were clear. Her chin was level and her lips were without compromise.

Buck said, "We could take you into Grass City an' make it the business of the marshal, miss."

"You—you wouldn't do that?"

"We could," Tortilla Joe supplied.

Her blue eyes, desperate and afraid, flicked from Buck to his partner, then back to the long-geared cowpuncher.

"Please, don't do that...please!"

Buck said, "That's a serious offense to sneak up on two sleepin' men an' try to rob them. You still have my partner's wallet."

She handed the wallet back to Tortilla Joe, hand trembling.

Buck said, "If you tell us, miss maybe we can help you."

She looked at him for a long moment, and then her bottom lip began to quiver. Her hands went up over her face and she turned and ran through the brush, running like a wounded doe.

"We follow her, Buckshot?"

Buck McKee showed a twisted smile. "You can't fight a woman," he reminded. He picked up the gun the girl had left.

They stood there. A few minutes later they heard a horse pull out of the brush below them. They saw her once as she rode across a far ridge, her pony running. She was headed for Grass City.

Buck flipped the gun she had forgotten. "Maybe we should return this," he said.

"We do that, Buckshot."

* * *

GRASS CITY was the typical Sierra gold town, located along a small creek and consisting of temporary frame buildings and tents. When Buck and Tortilla Joe rode in there was a gathering of miners in front of a large building that had wooden sides and a billowing canvas top.

"Prob'ly another miner killin'," Buck said.

One man was up on a platform, pounding a fist into his palm. He was saying that the miners had to take law and order into their own hands and not to depend too much on their marshal. He emphasized that the diggings were so strung out that, in all fairness to the marshal, he could not patrol the entire area. While he was at one end, a robbery and murder could be committed at the other.

They sat broncs at the edge of the crowd.

Tortilla Joe said, "We know that lanky gent, no?"

Buck looked keenly at the tall man. They were about sixty feet away and recognition was difficult over the assemblage of stove-pipe hats, army hats, and no hats at all. "Ain't that Tombstone O'Jones?"

"Look like heem to thees Mejicano, Buckshot."

Then the speaker looked right at them, and Buck recognized him for sure as Tombstone O'Jones. O'Jones had a long, horsey face—ugly and repulsive—and he wore a black suit. Long gangling arms stuck out from the ends of the sleeves. Buck figured the man was around fifty.

"Wonder if he remember us?"

Buck shook his head. The partners had seen Tombstone O'Jones about three years before down in Arizona Territory. They had ridden through a gold-rush town down there and Tombstone had run a combination saloon and undertaking-parlor. The funeral man had a bad, bad reputation.

Rumor held then that Tombstone O'Jones worked with a wild bunch. Anyway, nothing had been proved, but plenty had been thought. Evidently he was also running the weird combination of undertaker-parlor and saloon here, for over the door of the building behind him Buck read a sign: *Tombstone O'Jones, Whiskey And Coffins.*

"Must've been some miners killed," Tortilla said.

A man looked up at them. "Bandits kilt Phil Abbott an' Jack Briggs last night over on Willer Crick. Robbed them an' kilt them."

"Phil Abbott?" Buck asked, frowning.

"You know him?"

Buck explained that he and Tortilla Joe had spent a few hours in Grass City last night and that a man named Abbott had appeared friendly and had bought them a few drinks.

"That's the gent," the man said. "I mind now I seen you two with him at the bar. He had a full poke last night, Phill Abbott had."

"He sure did," Buck admitted.

He remembered another thing. When Abbott had taken out his poke to get the bartender to weigh out some dust Buck McKee had noticed that the buckskin poke had a queer design on it, burned into the leather. When he had mentioned this, Abbott had proudly said his little girl, who went to school in San Francisco, had burned on the design as a leather-working project in school. She had made him the poke, he had said.

Now that little girl was without a father.

Buck asked a few more questions. According to this miner Willow Creek was only a mile or so beyond the spot where they had spent the night.

Tortilla Joe's eyes held a question.

"I doubt it," Buck said.

"You never can tell," Tortilla Joe said, "about wimmens."

TOMBSTONE O'JONES finished his talk with, "Now watch your camps, men, and watch them good. Now everybody inside and have a drink to celebrate the weddin'. Come one, come all."

The crowd surged inside.

Buck said, "I can stand a drink."

"Before the breakfast, Buck?"

"We can eat inside. They've got a eatin' counter."

"Oh, *si*, I remembers now."

The long bar was full and drinks were being passed back by the bartenders. Buck and Tortilla Joe went to the lunch counter on the other side of the building and found stools. The waitress thought they were studying the menu so long because they were undecided about what to order. The real reason was they were trying to find some price that would somewhat fit their wallets.

They ordered.

Buck asked, "Celebrate who's marriage?"

"His," the girl said. "Tombstone's."

Buck shuddered. "Who'd marry that mug?" He did not mention Tombstone O'Jones' reputation, though. He got the impression the man was not well-known here for his shady past.

That was logical, he decided. It was a long distance from this part of the Sierras to the Border country of Arizona Territory.

"Etta Simms."

Buck said, "I'm a stranger here."

The girl elaborated for business was slow, all the customers being at the bar. Etta was the daughter of John Simms, she said. John had been injured a month or so ago when a mine shaft had caved in.

"He needs an operation on his leg, I understand."

Buck asked, "Cost a lot of money, eh?"

"About a thousan' bucks, I heard. Well, sir, what is your order?" And the waitress moved away.

Tortilla Joe munched, said "I weesh I had the tortilla, Buck. Thees food ees not good for the belly. He needs one thousan' an' she needed one thousan'...An' yonder, Buckshot, ees a man we know."

Buck followed his partner's gaze. He was a rat, this man Pete Smith, and he stood at the far end of the bar, talking to Tombstone O'Jones. He looked like a rat, too—short and sort of pointed, with a long nose and watery, swimming eyes.

Buck said, "Well, I'll be hanged, but two rats has got together."

Pete Smith saw them, nodded, and came over. "Howdy, McKee. Howdy, Tortilla. You boys jes' headin' through for Nevady, I take it."

Buck nodded. Neither he or Tortilla made a move toward shaking hands. They had not seen Pete Smith for two years, either. The last time they had seen him a mob aimed to lynch him over in Winne-

mucca for having a fight with a dance-hall girl. The girl had been of small account but it was still too much for the decent folks to stomach.

"Minin'?" Buck wanted to know.

"Down the crick a ways. Got a good claim, too." He gave them a shifty, hesitant look. "Stick right close to my claims, I do, with these killin's goin' on. Well, good to see you, men."

Pete Smith loafed back to the bar, where Buck noticed that Tombstone O'Jones was watching them, a frown on his ugly face. Their meal finished, the partners went outside, toothpicks jutting.

"Well, Buck, here we are, an' why?"

Buck said, "Looky, Tortilla."

A girl walked the plank sidewalk across the rutted, dusty street. She glanced at them once but there was no recognition in her glance. Buck spoke to a miner next to them.

"Who's that homely girl?"

"Homely?" The miner studied him like he was a man who had lost his mind. "That's the purtiest gal in this camp. That's Etta Simms."

"Oh." Buck's toothpick rose.

The miner studied him queerly, then moved away.

Tortilla Joe said, "Etta Seems, she goin' marry ugly ol' Tombstone, an' why? She try to hol' us up, an' why? She say one thousan' dollar she need. Her father, he need that, the waitress she say."

"So that's why she aims to hook up with Tombstone, eh?"

Tortilla shrugged. "What we do, Buck?"

"Visit John Simms."

* * *

THEY FOUND John Simms by following his daughter home. The crippled miner and his daughter lived in a tent at the far end of the street. When Etta admitted them her face went pale. Buck gave her her pistol.

"Please—"

Buck said, smiling, "Don't worry, girl."

She made a picture. A lovely picture. Color was again high on her cheeks, her eyes were as blue as Sierra skies. She went to the table, said, "Well, what is it...then?" She put the pistol in a drawer.

"We want to see your father," Tortilla said, gently.

From the other section of the tent came a man's harsh voice. "If you're talkin' to that snake of a Tombstone O'Jones, daughter, I'm climbin' off this bed an' bustin' him over the haid with this chair!"

"Hush, father."

Old John Simms was sinking back in his bed, pain scrawled across his grooved face. He stared up at Buck and Tortilla, gray eyes wide with pain.

"Who t'hell are you two? If you're gunmen fer that skunk of an O'Jones, then get outa here. He ain't gonna marry my girl, even if I does need a thousan' bucks! He ain't gonna!"

"Father!" Etta was very red.

Buck said, "We're from a miner's committee, Mr. Simms. We are represent'ives to check into your accident. There are too many accidents aroun' here."

"Too many robberies, too! An' they all come from the same place—from that undertakin' parlor an'—"

"Father!"

Old John stiffened, eyes closed, fighting his pain. Pity ran through Buck McKee. Suddenly the gangling cowpoke remembered the open, honest face of miner Phil Abbott. Phil Abbott's little girl, at this moment, was probably in her classroom, down in 'Frisco. She did not know yet her father had been murdered, his poke lifted. Buck realized he had a score to settle with somebody.

That little girl down there—the little girl Phil Abbott had been so proud of—demanded that...

"I was in my shaft, layin' on my belly," John Simms was saying. "Then behin' me a small charge of powder goes off. Rocks fall off'n the ceilin' an' bust my legs. Doc says I need a specialist in Denver, an' that's a thousan' dollars. So this danged daughter of mine this mawnin' goes an' offers herself to Tombstone O'Jones for the dinero... Now Tombstone is celebratin' his

comin' weddin'. Well, it won't come; I'll see to thet."

"Oh, father, please stop."

"Why should I stop?" The old man glared at McKee and Tortilla. "Bring this back to your miners committee, savvy? Jus' afore that boom went off I glances out the tunnel an' who's lookin' in but Pete Smith."

Buck nodded.

Aged eyes peered up. "You boys is new here, ain'tcha?"

"Came in last week," Buck said.

They went outside with Etta following them. When they were out of her fathers range of hearing the girl said, "Now what are you two doing in this town?"

"That," said Tortilla, "is Greece to us."

"You're not with a miner's committee," she challenged.

Buck looked at her until she reddened. "You're jes' about the purtiest girl I've ever met."

"Oh, shaw!" She was really blushing now. "Git gone, cowboy." She became serious. "But what do you want?"

"A smile," Tortilla said.

But there were no smiles in Etta Simms.

TORTILLA JOE said, "She ees clear now, eh, Buckshot? Thees Pete Smeeth, he blow up the shaft and boomo! John Seemms he get hurt. Maybe Pete want to keel him for Tombstone O'Jones, eh?"

"Could be."

"But he no keel heem, so steel Tombstone he no get girl, but theengs work good, at that, for with the operation needed, Tombstone steel ween the girl, *hola!*"

"I liked Phil Abbott."

Tortilla Joe sent his partner a slanting glance. "Me, I liked heem, too. Now hees leetle girl— That ees too bad."

They returned to the emporium of Tombstone O'Jones. Pete Smith stood across the street and Buck figured the sneak-thief had followed them down to John Simms' tent.

They had been in the saloon about ten minutes when Pete Smith came in. Smith went into an immediate conference with Tombstone O'Jones, and Buck caught them glancing at him once.

When his eyes met theirs, they glanced away.

He and Tortilla Joe stood at the bar, drinking beer. They had about enough money for another meal and two more bottles of beer.

Tombstone O'Jones came over and said, "Strangers, eh?"

"Pete Smith knows us," Buck said.

Tombstone lifted a long finger and waggled for a bartender. The man moved with alacrity down the bar.

"Whiskey for my two friends" Tombstone said, "and beer for me."

"Three beers," Buck McKee corrected.

Tombstone O'Jones' horse-face showed a brief frown. Evidently he was not used to being turned down on his choice of drinks, even though he had not consulted his "guests" ahead of time on their choices,

The beers came and Tombstone said, holding his glass aloft, "To my bride, the beautiful Etta Simms."

Buck looked over his glass at Tortilla Joe and winked.

They lowered glasses. Tombstone O'Jones became very friendly. Hadn't he seen them somewhere before? No! Well, that was odd—for some reason their faces seemed familiar. They knew John Simms, he took it?

Buck knew now, for sure, that Pete Smith had trailed them. "Known him for years," Buck lied.

Some of the conviviality left Tombstone O'Jones' voice. He did not want anybody hanging around his fiancee, he emphasized. He was the head mogul here in Grass City and Etta was doing real well by marrying him. Every word he hissed grated like emery-cloth on Buckshot McKee.

Tortilla Joe listened, face blank.

"That's it," Tombstone finished.

Buck straightened, grinning. "Plain enough," he said. "I don't care to be slid into one of your coffins."

"Got a whole back room of them," Tombstone O'Jones reminded.

"Some of them is bound to fit you two gents."

"We wants no troubles," Tortilla Joe said.

"That's the talk, men."

Buck McKee was smiling, but Tombstone O'Jones was not familiar with Buck McKee. Had he been familiar he would have been warned by the tightness of the tall cowpuncher's smile.

Buck said, "Well, we'll be driftin', now thet we've seen ol' John. Congratulations, Mr. O'Jones."

They shook hands all around, apparently parting the best of friends. This fooled Pete Smith and that worthy came over, smiling widely. He shook hands with Tortilla Joe and then with Buck.

"Been good to see you, Buck."

"Sure has," Buck grunted.

Still holding Pete Smith's right hand, Buckshot McKee sent in two hard left fists. Pete Smith yelled, threw up his left hand for a guard, but the fists whammed through. When Buck let go of Smith's hand, Smith sat down. And, as the gunman went down, Tortilla Joe grabbed Smith's .45.

Before Tombstone O'Jones could move, the Mexican had the big Colt in Tombstone's low ribs.

"You be the good boy," Tortilla murmured, "or else thees gon she go boom-boom! She ees dangerous!"

Tombstone O'Jones' hands stopped a foot above his two guns. Buck took the ugly man's two Colts and threw them across the room. Miners stared in amazement, but none made a move to interfere. Buck got the impression that Tombstone O'Jones was not too popular.

Pete Smith sat on the floor, head down, groaning as he spat. Pete Smith was so stunned he had no interest in this.

Tombstone O'Jones' pasty face was the color of gunpowder. He wet his lips then closed his mouth. His sunken, terrible eyes carried a threat.

"Get out of town!"

Buck said, "With pleasure."

THEY SPENT the rest of the day squatting in the *manzanita* on the slope above Grass City. Dusk came and became night and lamps and lanterns glowed down in the gulch.

Tortilla Joe said, "About that time, eh?"

"We've talked it over from all angles," Buck replied. "He must have it in a safe. And that safe, I'd say, was behind his saloon."

"That she would be."

Buck asked, "How are your fingers, Tortilla?"

"Me, I open any safe, fran..."

They rode down the slope, braced against saddle-forks as their broncs moved downward. When Tombstone O'Jones and Pete Smith had called them this had gone beyond the stage of mere interest. Buck still remembered the undertaker's hissed, angry warnings; he remembered Pete Smith's open, surly arrogance.

He kept remembering somebody else, too. She had a lovely face, an open, small mouth, and she was desperate. She was smart and quick, but she had her back to the wall, and she loved her father.

Miners had come in with dust, and the saloon of Tombstone O'Jones was doing a good business when Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe rode into the alley behind the dive. They left their broncs in the shadows and Tortilla said, "Here she comes a man, Buckshot."

Evidently Tombstone O'Jones had a guard out.

The guard said, "That you, Pete? Who's with you?"

Buck said, "Me an' a friend. Where's Tombstone?"

"In the saloon— Hey, you ain't Pete—"

That was all the guard said for some minutes. Tortilla Joe's billy-club saw to that. He had made it especially for such a purpose. All afternoon he had whittled it out of *manzanita*.

Buck said, "Now to get into that office."

The back of the building had bars across the windows. They were anchored firmly in concrete. Buck knew they could not get through them unless they had a hack-saw. And they had no hack-saw.

"Thees door, Buckshot; she ees not too tight."

Buck tried the door. His partner was right. Evidently it was bolted inside by a latch and padlock. Therefore it had little clearance and could move back and forth a little.

"Get your horse, Tortilla."

Tortilla went after his bronc and rode back. Buck undid the Mexican's catch-rope and tied it around the door handle. The horse pulled off the handle.

"Try that steel bar, across the door, Buck."

They had to work fast. Any time a miner might come into the alley. Buck made his tie, Tortilla's bronc went low, but the door held.

"Take a lunge at it, Tortilla."

Tortilla rode his bronc close, then dug in hooks. The bronc leaped, the rope whanged tight, and the door slid out into the alley, almost landing on the Mexican and his bronc.

Tortilla got his rope loose, coiled it, tied it to his fork. Leaving his bronc there he went into the room. Buck lit a kerosene lamp and its yellow rays showed from the lids of coffins.

COFFINS WERE all over. They sat on sawhorses and on chairs, coffins small, medium, and large. They gave Buck the willies. Flesh crept along his shoulders and his sweat was ice cold.

Tortilla Joe knelt, crossed himself.

Buck said, "There ain't no safe."

That knowledge brought Tortilla Joe to his feet, jaw sagging. "They ain't gold in here then? Maybe we take what you call the wrong shot, no?"

Buck stood there, lamplight limning his gaunt figure. "Where would be a good place to hide gold handy, Tortilla?"

From beyond the door leading to the saloon came the sound of miners and the call of the faro players.

Tortilla Joes' eyes, there in the lamplight, were big, round marbles, swiveling on sockets. He looked at the wall, at the desk, at the chair. But Buck had already searched the desk, finding no gold there.

"Maybe they hid heem in hills?" Buck asked, "How about a coffin?"

"No, I no touch those. No man's should touch coffins until that day they poot heem eento one!"

"All the more reason it's a good place to hide gold," Buck answered.

Buck started lifting the lids on coffins. He got a stick and ran back into them but felt nothing in about a dozen of them. Tortilla Joe followed, not touching a coffin, Buck noticed.

Buck didn't feel so hot about it himself. Those coffins, row upon row, made a ghostly, silent parade that seemed to mock him.

"No gold there," Tortilla muttered. "We on what you call the blind alley. Hey, what's that—"

The lid on one coffin, despite Buck's yanks, would not open.

Buck inspected it closely, heart beating fast. He saw that it was screwed down.

"Maybe dead man's, he een there?"

Buck reminded that they had buried Phil Abbott and his partner that afternoon. "Mind that pick out in the alley?"

"I get him."

Tortilla got the pick. Buck tried to get it under the lid, couldn't. He stood on the coffin, pick raised. He sent it home, sent it under the lid; he lay on the handle. Finally the lid popped open.

This time Tortilla Joe ran his grimy hand into the coffin. He came out with a small poke of gold. By this time Buck McKee had all the gold out of the coffin. Not much, either; just four pokes.

"Look, Tortilla."

Tortilla studied the poke. "That ees the one that Abbott he have, the one hees leetle girl make the sign on with the burnin' thing?"

"It," Buck said hoarsely.

"Then the Tomstone O'Jones, he ees the one who keels miners, an' he has help of the rat, Pete Smeeth?"

"That's it. Hey—"

The door leading to the saloon had opened, then closed. The partners turned, and there stood Tombstone O'Jones, his back to the door,

thumbs hooked in his belt ahead of his two bone-handled guns.

"Well, a visit, huh?"

Buck had his hand on his holstered gun. Beside him Tortilla Joe also stared, fist on his Colt.

Buck said, "We found that stolen gold, you lousy whelp! This poke has Abbott's brand on it. John Simms told us about seein' Pete Smith sneakin' around his shaft, right before the explosion!"

"You can add, eh?"

Buck wondered why Tombstone O'Jones had not come in with his guns drawn. For evidently he had heard the smash of the pick against the coffin-lid and had come in to investigate. But his doubts were not long seeking an answer.

"I got 'em covered from here, Tombstone."

Buck glanced at Pete Smith, standing in the doorway leading to the alley. He knew then he had been wrong about Tombstone O'Jones hearing the noise of the pick. Somebody out in the alley had noticed Tortilla's bronc and the pulled-down door and this trap had been set.

Pete Smith growled, "Sure, I set that blast off fella. Where you're goin' you cain't testify against me. Ain' that right, boss?"

"Don't talk too much!" Tombstone O'Jones snarled his words. "We found these fellas ramsackin' our coffin parlor. Jes' start shootin'!"

Buck knew that he and his partner could expect no mercy. This knowledge hastened his draw, bringing his gun level. He whirled, gun jutting. He used every ounce of speed, every bit of skill, that long practice had instill in him.

But it wasn't enough.

Pete Smith's bullet grazed his forearm, throwing his gun off balance. But before Pete Smith could shoot again, Buck's leads had found their marks. And he placed them accurately.

Smith lurched ahead, ran into a coffin, then folded over it. But Buck did not see this, for already his gun had swung to Tombstone O'Jones. But he did not fire. Tombstone O'Jones had his back to the wall, head slack, eyes dull. He slid down, length seeming to dissolve into the floor.

"Get out of here," Buck snapped. "But don't forget that gold!"

* * *

THE PARTNERS were in John Simms' tent when a man rushed in and hollered about Tombstone O'Jones and Pete Smith getting killed when they had jumped somebody back stealing a coffin.

"Stealin'—a coffin—" John Simms studied the man. "You—you gone loco, Phillips?"

"They're dead," Phillips said. "Plumb dead."

"Who—who killed them?" That was from Etta Simms.

Buck noticed her voice did not sound worried, even though her betrothed had been killed. He got to his feet.

"Well, good night, folks. The miners was glad to donate that gold to you. That should pay for your operation, Mr. Simms."

"God bless you," John Simms said, eyes misty.

Buck's arm hurt a little. He wanted to get outside in the brush, away from eyes, and rebind it. Etta walked in the lead and when they went through the kitchen she did not see Buck snag the clean dish-towel and put it inside his shirt.

"Men, you don't know what this means to dad. Thank God there are good people like you in this world."

"We didn't donate it all," Buck said. "The miners gave most, remember."

"Where are you going—"

But Buck and Tortilla were already in saddle. They rode out at a lope, Buck's bronc in the lead.

They rode past the crowd in front of Tombstone O'Jones' saloon and the night rushed out to greet them. Buck bandaged his arm as they rode into the dark.

"Hola, now we send a poke of this gold to the leetle Abbott girl, Buck, no? There ees gold left for us, too. Not much, but gold for us. Somehow we have to get the—what you call it—expense money, no?"

Buck was remembering the tears on Etta Simms' lovely eyes. But he managed to say, "Yes, Tortilla, yes."

SILENT KILLER

COMPLETE RANGELAND NOVELETTE

by Cliff Campbell

Death struck quietly, silently when Happy Myers sold his spread, and a nameless killer chose his victims, one by one. Yet, there seemed to be no reason behind it . . .

HAPPY MYERS, with his usual harassed frown, looked down the bar at the stranger until Chuck O'Day jerked at his sleeve; then he shifted his gaze to watch a fly buzzing over the backbar.

"Listen, Happy—I'm talkin' to you! Now, if I was to say I was a lawyer and had a million dollars in my pocket a rich uncle had left you —would it draw a smile? Honest, now, would it? What'd you say, Happy?"

"I'd say you was a danged liar," growled Happy, and the barkeep grinned. Every day was Friday the 13th to Happy Myers. "Whyfor should I smile, huh? I ain't no cat. I never had no luck and never will. Dang it, all you jaspers think a feller had ought to go around wearing a grin when his cows have died off and his range is burnt up, and his place has gone all to Halifax and—"

"And his girl has turned him down," put in Chuck.

"Aw, go to—," said Happy. It was no secret that Happy Myers had ridden to a hard fall with Betty Lighton. But then, so had others in Soldado County.

Happy owned an extremely promising bit of range, one with possibilities. He had taken it over ten years previously from the last of the Sanchez family, and had worked like a dog to make a go of it, but without success; the load had proven too heavy for his shoulders. As a matter of fact, a little more work and a little less gambling at poker would have seen Happy a successful cowman instead of a dispirited failure.

"Well," said Chuck, "you and me are in the same boat as regards the girl, so cheer up and have a drink on me. I'll make you a proposition, Happy."

Happy nodded sourly. Chuck O'Day had the worst bit of range in Soldado County, but he had some good stock on it. He was a vibrant man, wiry, gray-mustached, alert. He went on to make his proposition, careless that the stranger had moved closer along the bar and could hear what was said. The three were alone in the *Two-Bit Palace*, save for the barkeep.

"You got range, I got cows," said Chuck, fingering his glass. "S'pose we throw 'em together, Happy, and see what we can do, huh?"

Happy Myers shook his head gloomily. "Not me," he said. "I'm done with this here country. I'm going to let the danged outfit go for what she'll bring and go back down South. I was a durned fool ever to come up here, anyhow. S'posing we did throw the outfits together—what then? Same old story. Mortgage payments and interest and taxes and gosh knows what else. Nope, I'm done! I'll give you my equity in the Lazy S for a thousand bucks, by gosh! And you won't have no bargain at that, neither."

"Ought to be worth that," said Chuck, and shook his head. "If I had a thousand my own self, I could use it! Well, here's luck. I hope you don't turn the outfit in to that durned Hoskins."

The Lazy S riders were on the alert.

Happy grimaced. "Who else is there to gimme a thousand for it, huh?"

"Me, maybe," said the stranger.

BOTH men turned and sized him up at a glance. He had a level eye, a serious, hard-chiseled face; under his pushed-back Stetson his hair showed crisp, reddish, rather long. His nose was large, and so was his mouth, but they went well with the square chin and firm contours. A bronzed, outdoor man, his clothes were good but well worn.

"My name's Larson, gents," he said quietly. "I had a part-interest in the Running M outfit, down South, and done sold out. Now, does this here deal go through or not?"

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed Chuck O'Day. "You ain't buying a property you never seen, Larson! Are you drunk?"

Larson gave him a long, level look, and then smiled. "I'm buying on the strength of your own words."

"Mine?" yapped Chuck, startled. "You don't know me!"

"I don't need to." Larson turned. "Well, what about it? Yes or no?"

"Yes, by gosh!" said Happy Myers. "Lessee your money, and come on over to see a lawyer and fix it

up, and she's your'n."

Larson calmly produced a roll of hundred-dollar bills, flipped it with his thumb, and the two men strode out of the *Two-Bit Palace*. Leaning on the bar, Chuck O'Day stared blankly after them, then turned dazily to the barkeep.

"Am I drunk, or did it happen?" he queried.

"Reckon it happened," and the other grinned and flicked his towel along the bar. "I dunno who's the fool, but from what I hear, that there Sanchez range ain't got no luck. Hyah! Morning, Hoskins."

Hoskins stepped inside and looked around, with a nod to the two men. He came to the bar and accepted the bottle shoved at him, and poured a small drink. "How," he said and put down the glass. "Sort of looked to see Myers around. Ain't been in?"

"Been and gone," and the barkeep grinned. "Sold out his place. Getting the papers fixed up now."

Hoskins looked as though a ghost had slapped him, and blinked. He was a spare, lean, powerful man with an air of resolute determination, a thin-lipped mouth, and hard agate eyes. Nobody would take him to be a sunny and popular gentleman; he was not popular, being a man who saved and did not spend. Consequently, he owned the best ranch in the county and had an interest in two others.

"Sold it, huh?" he repeated. "Dang it all! I'll fix him for that—"

Then he turned and bolted out of the *Two-Bit Palace*. Chuck O'Day grinned widely. "Aimed to buy it cheap his own self, huh? I bet he raises—with Happy."

Presently Larson came striding in, alone, came up to the bar, and signaled a drink. "Signed, sealed and delivered, and the deed left for recording," he said curtly. "Here's luck to our deal; you're Chuck O'Day, I understand."

"Yep," said Chuck, and shook hands. "We'll go into details—"

From somewhere, not close by, came the sharp report of a pistol shot.

"Somebody shooting at tin cans," said the barkeep. "You gents going into partnership, huh? I shorely hopes you has luck, gents—drink on the house."

Larson nodded thanks, and fell into talk with Chuck O'Day. Somebody came running, paused in the doorway, and let out a yell before continuing.

"Hey, boys! Happy Myers just been killed. Come on!"

THREE minutes later, Larson and Chuck shoved into the crowd collecting on the side street behind the bank. Happy Myers lay just at the alley, as though he had been shot by someone waiting there to get him as he came by; also, he had been shot from behind.

Sheriff Ranigan was already on the scene, furious and mouthing oaths through his heavy walrus mustache, for no one had seen the killing and no one knew who had done it or why. A long whistle broke from Chuck. "By gosh! Hoskins said he'd fix him—I reckon he done it!"

"What's that?" The sheriff swung about. Instantly Chuck and Larson became the center of attention. "What's that, Chuck?"

"Aw— I spoke before I thought. Meet my new partner—Sheriff Ranigan, Red Larson from down below. Larson just bought Happy's outfit aiming to throw in with me. Hoskins come into the *Palace*—"

He told of Hoskins' words, and significant looks were exchanged.

"That ain't evidence," said the sheriff. "Larson, where'd you leave Happy?"

"At the recorder's office," said Larson quietly. "I turned over a thousand in cash to him, we left the deed for recording, and Happy said he'd go to the bank from there. I went to the *Palace*—"

"He was talking to us when we heard the shot," said Chuck. "We thought it was somebody shooting at tin cans."

Sheriff Ranigan stopped and went through the pockets of Happy Myers. "Give him a thousand, huh? He ain't got it now," he said. One of the bank clerks spoke up.

"Happy hadn't been in the bank today, neither."

"Anybody seen Hoskins?" demanded the sheriff, looking around. A man who had just come up, lanky, brown-skinned man with hawk-nose and dark eyes, evidently an Indian, spoke.

"Just left him."

"Hullo, Mose! Where was he?"

"Livery. Getting his hoss and pulling out."

"Well, I ain't going after him," said Ranigan decidedly. "Chet Hoskins ain't the man to shoot anybody from behind and rob him. We'd got to have more evidence than we got to make me think so!"

There was a mutter of approval. Hoskins was not liked, but this was square talk.

THE INDIAN pushed forward, his eyes glittering. He had a small ranch up in the hills, and was generally reckoned a very good man to let alone. He knelt beside Happy, and for a moment his hand worked at that of the dead man, prying open the clenched fingers. He rose, and held up an ordinary gray button.

"Happy got a grab, anyhow," he said. "I reckon, Ranigan, if you find the feller whose coat this come from you've got your man."

"Good for you!" exclaimed the sheriff excitedly taking the button. The crowd thronged in with a buzz of tongues.

Larson looked at the button. He started to speak, checked himself, then his eyes lifted to the face of Indian Mose. His gray eyes narrowed icily, and the shadow of a smile touched his lips. Mose saw that look, and answered it with a sharp glitter, then spoke out.

"If I was a stranger, and had turned over a lot of cash to a feller for his outfit," he drawled, "I'd sure be tempted, you bet!"

"Tempted?" Ranigan looked up, pocketed the button. "What you mean, Mose?"

"I mean," and the Indian looked steadily at Larson, "that I'd arrange to part from that feller and be somewheres else with witnesses, and a friend of mine would put a bullet into that feller and take the money back—"

There was dead silence, Larson took a step forward, and the Indian's hand fell—but Larson's two hands came out, empty.

"I'm packin' no gun," he said, and Mose scowled yet dared not draw. Across the body of Happy Myers, Larson faced the snake-eyed Indian. "But I will be packing one, just as soon as I can get it out of my roll —savvy?"

Mose shrugged. "Suits me," he said. "I'm sayin' how the thing looks to me. Ain't I got the right?"

"Sure," said Larson and smiled. "I don't know you—but you know good and well what I saw, huh? All right. Let it sleep. You got a right to say anything you like, sure, and I got the right to act on it, too—"

His smiling, easy manner had completely deceived everyone, even the Indian—until his fist drove out in a short but terrifically powerful jab. Mose staggered under the impact, turned whitish green, clapped both hands to his solar plexus, and went to sleep.

"My gosh!" said Ranigan. "You've killed him, feller!"

"Nope," said Larson. "I got around killing him. How come he picked on me with that fool story? I rode into town alone. I'm alone now—"

"No, you ain't!" exclaimed Chuck O'Day. "Not while I'm here, you ain't!"

"Well, I'm aiming to settle right here in Soldado City, Soldado County," said Larson, glancing around. "Does any other gent incline to the notion this Injun outlined?"

"Don't be a danged fool," said the sheriff. "Mose is bad med'cine. He's sour on the hull world, Mose is, and now you'd better either plug him or steer clear of him. As for what he said—shucks!"

Larson nodded, beckoned Chuck O'Day, and drew him out of the crowd. "Let's go look over our property, pardner. What say?"

"All right," said Chuck, and

grinned as he rubbed his gray mustache. Let's!"

WITH a little over his thousand, Larson had come seeking his fortune in Soldado County, and apparently had found it. Going over things with Chuck, he was well satisfied with his bargain. The Lazy S, as his new brand was registered, hung over from the Sanchez days; and although there were few cows to bear it, and the outfit was heavily mortgaged, it might be turned into a good thing.

"Fact is," ruminated Chuck, "I don't see how in tarnation Happy lost so danged many calves! We have had some pretty stiff winters lately; seems like the climate ain't what it used to be. Winters hadn't ought to kill off calves like they done to Happy, though."

"Sure they were killed?" queried Larson. Chuck nodded.

"Sure. Oh, a few might ha' gone other ways, but last March I done rode out with Happy one day my own self and seen forty-odd skeletons—that was right after the snow melted off. All calves."

"Either it ain't natural," observed Larson, frowning, "or else Happy was a durned poor cow-hand."

"Nope, Happy was all right, within limits; but the night o' the big snow there was a three-day poker game going, and I reckon Happy trusted them two vaqueros of his and was out of luck both ways, game and stock. Still and all, it was right queer—forty-odd calves! Looked to me like them critters of his had a foolish streak."

"Who do you reckon killed him?" asked Larson presently, when they had swung off the highway and were heading for the foothills. "What enemies did he have?"

"Nobody I know of," said Chuck O'Day. "He fired them two vaqueros come summer—ain't enough stock left to more'n keep him busy himself. They drifted off south, though. I dunno of any real enemies Happy had. He's been livin' out there along with Tia Manuela to run the place. She's a right smart old dame, too, Going on eighty and spry as a whip. Well, there lays my outfit, over beyond them lomas. Critters are mostly up that long canyon off to the left—she leads over towards the Lazy S range."

Little could be seen of Chuck's outfit, except a shack beside the tiny creek, and a barn and corral slightly farther. Larson drew his own conclusions, and voiced them.

"You ain't gone in for extravagant living, huh?"

"Not me," said Chuck. "I been laying solid foundations, feller. This here range o' mine is mighty poor, as you can see, but I got some right smart stock. I did figger to build me a real house this summer, but Happy sold off most of his stock, so I took 'em over and that took what money I had saved. Happy, he went in heavy to raise alfalfa and grass this summer, and his best stands got burnt up on him, and that broke his back, I reckon."

They rode on, cutting over the rolling hills by a foot-path that lopped three miles off the distance to the Lazy S, and presently drew rein on a long sloping canyon side. Here Larson, for the first time, gazed upon his own land and found it good.

As Chuck pointed out, the Lazy S consisted mainly of the chief canyon, which was large and long and had a creek, and of two other well-grassed canyons, with enough grazing upland to bring the range to respectable size. The bad summer had killed any hope of large returns from the grass and alfalfa, but for the purposes of Chuck O'Day's stock there was enough and ample to run through the winter.

The buildings showed against the background of trees beside the creek, at the bend of the main canyon—low, gray structures of adobe, the house surrounding a patio where flowers and two huge pepper-trees luxuriated in color.

"Looks like a right pleasant place," said Larson.

"Sure is. You got visitors, seems like."

Larson nodded, two horses appearing outside the gate of the house.

"I been thinking about them calves," he said. "You-all didn't look to see if there was any lead in them skeletons?"

"Huh?" No, we didn't," said Chuck thoughtfully. "You mean somebody had shot 'em and left 'em for the snow to cover? That's possible, sure is—especially if it was done the time of the big snow. But it ain't likely. A lot o' riders were out then, looking after stock, and any such cannonading would have been heard. Besides, it wasn't only then—it was right along. Happy, he had the notion there was a p'izen spring somewheres that killed them off, and he done spent a lot o' time looking for it."

"Huh! S'posin anyone who had done it to ruin Happy—then who? Who wanted to buy this outfit?"

"Hoskins?" Chuck rubbed his bristly mustache and frowned. He waved his hand toward the house. "Looks like Hoskins' pinto there now. But no, I don't hardly think he'd go in for such a game; it ain't done. He'd rustle, or his riders would, like a shot, and I bet he's branded more'n one of Happy's mavericks—but he ain't lowdown, Hoskins ain't—"

2

THERE WAS a queer, slapping sound, as though Larson had brought down his palm on his horse's rump. The horse flung up its head, leaped, then came down suddenly in a pile. Larson, fortunately flung clear, rolled over and picked himself up. Chuck's horse chose the moment to go in for exercise, and was rudely quelled.

"Hurt? Doggone this cayuse!" Chuck came back to Larson. "What's the trouble? By gosh, if your hoss ain't dead!"

Larson was squinting along the hills, a bit white around the nostrils. Chuck dismounted, looked at the blood running from the tongue of the dead horse, uttered a low, astounded whistle. The animal had been shot.

"Uh-huh," said Larson. "Did you hear anything?"

"Not a danged thing!" exclaimed Chuck. "Can't be bullets without a gun—hey, get to cover, feller!"

Larson shook his head. "No use. Either it was an accident or whoever did it merely wanted to shoot a hoss. Wait and see."

The mystery was baffling. No living thing was in sight except the two horses at the gate of the Lazy S. No shot had been heard. Yet there lay the dead horse, in token that the killer lay ambushed at no great distance.

"Whoever pulled that trigger done himself a mighty bad turn," said Larson, quietly. "That was a mighty good hoss."

"I bet he did! We'll run it down somehow—"

"I don't mean that way. Remember what we were just talking about? How all them calves come to be killed off? Partner, this gent has tipped his hand here and now."

"Howcome?"

"Didn't you ever hear of these contraptions—silencers, they're called—to fit on a rifle and kill the sound?"

"Jumping golliwogs! Yes, I've heard of 'em, but never seen one. Larson, if you ain't hit the nail on the head, I'm a Dutchman!" exclaimed Chuck O'Day. Then he sobered quickly. 'But that don't help us to find this gent, or learn who he is!"

"We know what we're looking for, anyhow," said Larson.

WHEN LARSON and Chuck walked in, their approach was unheard until Chuck hammered on the door.

Hoskins and Betty Lighton were with Tia Manuela in the combined parlor and office, whose furnishings had suffered much since the old Sanchez days but still hinted at comfortable luxury, with Indian rugs and massive hand-made furniture.

Hoskins, who had met the girl on his way here, had told Tia Manuela about the change of ownership. He, as yet, did not know that Happy Myers was dead. The old woman listened, her beady eyes troubled as

they flitted from man's face to girl's face.

"Well," said Hoskins, a trifle irritably, "suppose you run along, Tia Manuela. I got a few words to say to Miss Lighton, in private."

The old woman rose, but the girl checked her. "You've nothing to say to me that anyone can't hear, Mr. Hoskins," she said coolly. "What's it about?"

He colored, and a spark of anger leaped in his eyes. "So that's the way of it, huh?" he said. "You know good'n well what I wanted to talk about, Betty. If you don't aim to let me do it—"

He checked himself. Tia Manuela looked at him and grinned. "What you come for, huh? You want to see me?"

Hoskins became calm and cool again. "Yes," he said, accepting his rebuff at the hands of the girl. "Two days ago, Happy Myers agreed that he'd sell out to me. We outlined the agreement, and he said he'd write it out that night and meet me in town today. He met this red-headed stranger first and sold the place. Now, I'm sure he has the signed agreement here. I met him this morning at the recorder's office, and he said he had forgotten to fetch it along, but it didn't matter because the place was sold. So I came back from town, then remembered that agreement and headed here. I want to find it."

"What business is it to you?" demanded Tia Manuela bluntly. At her tone, Hoskins flushed a little.

"It's to your interest and mine both," he said. "Happy met this slick stranger, had a few drinks, and sold for a song—was cheated. This man Larson comes in here, and probably fires you first thing and makes a lot of changes. I need this range. If I have that signed agreement from Happy, I can make a lot of trouble for Larson, and I mean to do it. This outfit should be mine."

"But it ain't," said Tia Manuela. She turned, went to the desk in the corner, and picked up an unaddressed envelope, and opened it. She drew out a paper and then handed it to Betty Lighton, for she could not read English. "Is that it?"

"Yes," said the girl, and gave it back.

"All right," said Hoskins. "Give it here, and we're all fixed."

"What you say?" Tia Manuela looked at the girl.

"I say it's a contemptible trick!" flashed Betty Lighton angrily. "Hoskins, you've no business trying to—"

"What's it to you?" he broke in hotly, coming to his feet. "You stay out of this, hear me? Manuela, gimme that there letter."

"You go to—," said Tia Manuela calmly.

At this moment, came the hammering on the front door, and Chuck's voice.

"Hi, in there! Wake up—new owner's come!"

Hoskins stood biting his lip, angry, baffled, uncertain.

WHEN LARSON came into the room and was introduced, he saw that something unusual had been going on—but for the moment he could fasten his attention on nobody but the girl whose hand he shook and dropped again. She was slender, brown-haired, gray-eyed, very capable in every feature, sunbrowned and level of look.

"So you're Betty Lighton!" he exclaimed. "Chuck was telling me about you—I'm mighty glad to meet you! And this is Tia Manuela, eh? Well, *madre mia*, from what I hear this house is as much yours as mine, and I'll be mighty proud if you'll stay right here and help take care of us! Glad to meet you, Hoskins. I—er—"

He broke off abruptly. His gaze fastened on the coat of Hoskins. Its lower button was missing.

"Set down, everybody!" said Chuck, pulling up chairs. "Is this here party aiming at business or pleasure?"

"Mostly business," said the girl drily. "At least, I had business with Happy—I don't know just where I stand now. But Mr. Hoskins knows where he stands. Speak your piece and let's have it out!"

Hoskins had no escape. He shrugged, and turned to Larson. "My

range runs over into the Lazy S east range," he said, and went on to tell of his agreement with Happy, and of the latter's words to him that morning. He showed no anger whatever —he was plunging into straight business, and showed it.

"Now," he concluded, "Tia Manuela has the letter or agreement from Happy. I came here to get it if I could. It shows clearly that Happy had agreed to sell me the place, and I want it. I'm prepared to pay you a good profit on the deal, Larson, if you'll turn it over to me."

"You aiming to make trouble for me, Hoskins?" he asked quietly.

"If you won't turn over the outfit peaceably, yes," said Hoskins, equally quiet. "If I had that agreement, I'd hold you pretty well by the neck. Still, I'd like to avoid any trouble, and I'm willing to pay well."

Larson broke into a laugh. "Hoskins, danged if I don't like your frankness!" he exclaimed, not knowing that Hoskins had been absolutely forced into showing his hand. "Now, I'll match you squarely. I don't aim to turn this place over to anyone. But I'll give you the paper you want—where is it?"

Tia Manuela handed it to him. Chuck opened his mouth and started to speak, then checked himself and listened in some consternation. Larson read the paper.

"Yes, Happy agrees to sell you the outfit," he said with a nod. "I like a challenge, Hoskins, and you've come out squarely with it. Take the agreement and make the best of it."

He held out the paper, and Hoskins took it somewhat blankly.

"You know I can sue you over this?" he asked. "Happy will swear to it, and—"

"I know a little law," said Larson cheerfully, beginning to roll a smoke. "A contract is not a contract unless it bears the signatures of both contracting parties. I'm giving you that paper with Happy's signature alone on it—and so call all here to witness. So far as the law is concerned you can whistle and welcome!"

"But Happy Myers will swear that we settled the contract—"

"Happy Myers is dead," said Chuck O'Day, and the words fell like a bomb on the room.

While Tia Manuela crossed herself and mumbled prayers, Chuck told of how Happy Myers had gone west. For Hoskins, of course, this altered everything, and as he listened, his strong fingers wrenched the agreement into tiny scraps.

"And nobody knows who did it?" broke out Betty Lighton, her face a little pale. "Why, it's impossible—in broad daylight, in the middle of town!"

"Well," drawled Chuck, "they done found—"

"Wait," said Larson, taking out his knife and opening it. With a smile, he came to Hoskins. "Hold still, now—I'm doing you a good turn."

Before the astonished, half-angry rancher could object, Larson whipped off the other buttons of his coat and flung them through the open doorway into the courtyard.

"You don't know how you lost the button this morning, do you?" he asked.

"Didn't know I'd lost it until just as I got here." Hoskins frowned watching him sharply, half suspicious. "Why?"

"Meet Injun Mose in town?"

"Yes," said Hoskins. "At the livery—fairly bumped into him."

Larson smiled grimly. "Go ahead, Chuck. Tell 'em about the button."

AS CHUCK O'DAY recounted the finding of the button in the dead man's hand, or rather its supposed finding, Hoskins tautened, and his face became dark. He growled a repressed oath, then fell silent.

"But," put in Betty Lighton swiftly, turning wide eyes to Larson, "how could Mose have known Happy was dead, there at the livery? It must have just happened—"

"Either he saw it, or he did it," said Larson. "Too late now to squeal. If we had known everything then, we could have called his turn and searched him; providing he did it, we're too late. It would be hard, now, to make anyone believe the button

was not found in Happy's hand. You see, Hoskins?"

"Yes," said Hoskins, flushing slightly. "You've done me a good turn, Larson—and I sure am sorry for figgering on fighting you."

"What's the Injun got against you?" demanded Chuck.

"I booted him off the place one night last winter—suspicioned he was stealing stuff. The lowdown snake! He likely aimed to have me come into town, never bothering about that there button—and it would have made trouble. I'm going to see that there Injun and sort of talk to him."

"Better not know anything about it," said Larson, as Hoskins rose.

"Thanks. Good luck. See you all later. Ride over any time, Larson, and if you need any help here, call on me."

Hoskins strode out of the room. Larson watched him mount and ride away. "Life's queer, ain't it?" He turned, smiling. "Well, Miss Lighton, looks like good luck to find you here when I come into the place for the first time!"

"Why so?" she queried, looking at him.

"Why not?" said Larson, meeting her gaze. "I reckon you'd bring good luck to any outfit."

Betty Lighton settled herself in her chair and inspected Larson coolly. "I really came over here on business—with Happy," she began. "You know, my father is manager of the Figure Four—"

"It's a dude ranch," put in Chuck, grinning.

The girl laughed. "Well, dad wanted some alfalfa, and Happy said he intended to cut last week and would sell us the cutting. We hadn't heard any more from him. Dad got kicked by a horse yesterday and is laid up, so I rode over to see if we can depend on getting that feed or not. And now, of course—"

Larson gave his partner an inquiring glance. Chuck nodded. "I guess you can, ma'am. You see, Red and me aims to throw in our two outfits together. Now, the last cutting of this crop ought to be more'n enough to run us this winter, and we'll take a squint over the layout tomorrow, and let you-all know."

"Fine," said the girl. "It's terrible about this killing, isn't it? And from all you say, it does seem as though that Indian Mose must have been the one. He's hated Happy for a long time."

"He has?" demanded Larson in surprise. "Why?"

"I don't know. It had something to do with a horse-trade when Happy first came here, years ago. He's a bad one, that Indian!"

"Hm!" said Chuck O'Day. "Well, he'll be a good one if we can ever connect him up with killing Happy! Do you know, ma'am, of anyone in these parts that has a silencer for a rifle? I've sort of itched to get one and see how she worked, if she would work."

"Oh, they work," said the girl, and Larson smiled to himself, grimly. "Let me see—who was it? I did hear of someone—seems to me it was last summer—"

Chuck was elaborately careless. Larson smoked woodenly, waiting, while the girl frowned at the wall-map trying to think.

"Oh, yes—it was Asa Wartman! Ace was over at the place one day, and I heard him telling dad he had just ordered one of those silencers to have some fun with."

"And who," queried Larson, "may Ace Wartman be?"

"He's the H Cross foreman and range boss and general manager for Hoskins," said Chuck.

DAYS ROLLED in swift, smooth sequence, and the new partnership fell into easily running lines, the two ranches being flung into one and Chuck's half-dozen riders moving the stock into the fresher range. Half a morning's business in town showed Larson that he had taken a large bite, though not more than could be chewed, with luck. The Lazy S was heavily in debt—but then, a thousand dollars doesn't buy the world. And Larson said nothing to anyone, even Chuck, about a dozen very fine breed steers that were being brought up from Geronimo by two riders, to be

flung into the jackpot. He was keeping that as a surprise.

Nor did he say anything about Indian Mose and the button; according to the verdict of the coroner's jury, Happy Myers had come to his death at the hands of persons unknown.

Of Indian Mose nothing was seen. Larson received a definite warning from Chuck to look out for the man, and Chuck was serious.

"He's a bad Injun, Red! What's likely to happen is a bullet from a hilltop some day, like the one killed your hoss out there."

"Think he done that job?" demanded Larson. Chuck shook his head.

"Reckon not. He might ha' rid out from town real fast and got ahead of us, sure, but remember the feller who shot your hoss had a silencer."

"Uh-huh." Larson met the eyes of his partner. "What about this Ace Wartman, huh? You and me had better come clean with our outfit, if we can trust 'em."

The Lazy S riders, as they now were—for Chuck was using the Sanchez brand—had gathered that afternoon for orders in regard to fences. Larson was going over to the Figure Four in the morning to arrange with Lighton about the alfalfa, and inside another two days he hoped to get things running clear, before his dozen fine steers arrived from the south. Chuck went out and brought in his men, whose headquarters were back at his former abode.

Larson had already sized up the six as a good lot. Williams and Bisby were top-hands, the Kelleher brothers almost as good, while old Danny Jenkins and the saturnine Miguel knew their business. They grouped around, and Larson told them exactly what he knew.

"This is a case where everybody takes holt and pulls," he said, after recounting how his horse was shot under him. "Ace Wartman has a silencer—that much is clear, I don't trust Hoskins a mite. There's dirty work somewhere, and Happy Myers suffered from it. What's Ace Wartman like?"

Bisby grinned. "Ace is big, bold and bad," he said, his opinion being confirmed by a mutter from the others.

"He's plumb ornery," said Williams, "but he is sure one top-hand, Red."

"You know this range better than I do," said Larson. "Does it look to you-all like Hoskins' outfit has been trying to run Happy Myers into the ground?"

"Hoskins ain't any angel," said Danny Jenkins significantly. "But I dunno about that there shooting contraption. I ain't seen none of the H Cross boys with any."

"I'll find out about that quick enough myself tomorrow," said Larson.

Morning came, and before sunrise Larson and Chuck were up and off, for it was a good ride over to the Figure Four.

"Want to go by way of the H Cross, or come back that way?" demanded Chuck.

"Come back," said Larson curtly.

"Stop there for dinner, then. We'll cut across the hills."

They encountered no one. On a long hillside, when they were nearly at their destination, Chuck paused, beckoned his companion, and handed over a pair of ancient field-glasses he had brought along. He pointed to a distant clump of aspens above a canyon.

"Sight on them aspens, Red—see 'em? Look just beyond and lower. Got it?"

"Uh-huh. A shack."

"Injun Mose. That's his place."

3

THE MORNING was half gone when they headed into the long canyon where the buildings of the Figure Four were clumped—a dude ranch indeed, ornately fenced, well painted, everything in apple-pie-order. Lighton came limping out to meet them, greeted them cordially, and ushered them into his office. Betty, he explained, had gone to town.

"That girl is usually gone," he said, with a grimace. "She does more run-

ning of this here outfit than I do, by gosh! Make yourselves comfortable, gents."

The Figure Four was not a large outfit, going in for breed horses and stock altogether. It made money, however, and had money to spend, and in ten minutes the Lazy S alfalfa was arranged for. Beyond a perfunctory look around, Larson refused to stay, frankly admitting that he had to settle some unpleasant affairs with the H Cross on the way back.

"So!" said Lighton, rubbing his chin. "Well, I ain't any too proud of that there outfit, but they ain't easy to settle anything with. I hope you have luck."

"Well? What's your judgment, partner?"

Larson chuckled. "The boss of that outfit is heading back from town, I reckon."

"Yep, you bet! Well, now we got a clear road ahead. The Figure Four ain't a ranch nohow—it's a reg'lar danged old farm, that's all. Want to stick to the road, huh? Not cut acrost lots?"

Larson's eyes twinkled. "Sure, stick to the road, partner!"

"I thought so. She's a right good-traveled road, too—every danged puncher in the county comes a-riding out this way on one excuse or another. Gid 'ap, dang your hide! Never mind that there sidewinder—"

Chuck leaned over as his horse plunged, slipped out his gun, and shot. The tiny, vicious reptile coiled in a hoof-print straightened out convulsively—what was left of it.

The yellow track wound on along the range, which through here was surprisingly well wooded to the eyes of Larson, more accustomed to the bare brushed hills of the south. There was no large timber, but there was enough to give a rich aspect to the whole landscape.

Two figures appeared, riding in by a side track that wound off to the H Cross, as a sign-post indicated. A slow rise of yellow dust showed ahead—someone else was coming by the road from town. Chuck O'Day drew rein, as they came to the fork.

"Ain't no hurry, I reckon," he drawled. "Here's Ace Wartman now, and one of his vaqueros."

Larson, rolling a cigarette, watched the approaching H Cross foreman appraisingly. The second man was a swarthy native. Asa, however, looked all his reputation. He was burly, heavy-set, but all muscle. His face had a heavy, wide, straight nose, above which met his thick black brows. His deeply cleft chin was massive, his eyes were dark and challenging, hotly intolerant. Both he and his vaquero wore guns.

"Howdy," he said to Chuck, as he came up.

"Howdy, Ace. Meet Red Larson, my partner."

"Glad to meet yuh," said Wartman put out his hand. Larson met a heavy, massive grip. "Aimin' for our place?"

Larson nodded. "For a word with you," he said, and held a match to his cigarette.

"I sure aim to have a word with you, too," said Wartman, an ugly note of passion in his eyes and voice. "I hear you've been making talk about the H Cross givin' its attention to the Lazy S stock. That true?"

"No," said Larson looking at him steadily. He perceived that the man was in a riot of fury, inwardly. "Who's been telling you that?"

"None o' your business—"

"Hold on. It *is* my business. I'm telling you it's not true—savvy? Who's been running to you with lies?"

Wartman gave him a keen, angry glare. "Lies? I dunno where the lie is, but I'd like to know!"

"All right." Larson kept cool. "You've called me a liar, then. Now, when I have any talk to make about you and your outfit I make it to your face—that's why I'm here. You've got a rifle silencer, haven't you?"

"Huh?" Wartman scowled. "A silencer? What's that to you?"

"A good deal. The other day my horse was shot under me—someone did it with a silenced rifle. Last winter the Lazy S calves were shot down by a silenced rifle—they weren't killed by the snow, not much! I want to know whether you still have that silencer—"

Larson had not raised his voice, had put the question quietly and steadily, without any evidence of passion. But Ace Wartman, already enflamed, took no heed that he was merely being questioned, not accused. His hand shot for his gun and the weapon roared.

Unwarned, not expecting such action, Larson instinctively drove in his spurs and his horse plunged, rearing wildly in the air. Wartman's gun spoke again then Larson fired a snap shot, even as his horse was falling under him, and as he went rolling in the dust he saw Wartman go limp across the saddle of his own beast, and fall.

"Hurt?" came the voice of Chuck trying to check his frightened mount.

"Nope." Larson rose. His horse was kicking convulsively, shot through the head. The vaquero caught that of Wartman, who lay face down, and waited passively under the menace of Chuck's gun.

And upon this scene came Sheriff Ranigan, jogging out from town.

"I ALLUS said Ace would raise—when he cut loose," said the beetle-browed sheriff, after ascertaining the facts from Chuck and from the sullen vaquero. Larson had said little. "This was Ace's fault, right enough. Miguel! Go on home and tell 'em to get here with a team and take Ace in to town. I'll wait here with him. He ain't dead, but we got to have Doc Elders see to him pronto. Git!"

Miguel departed, leaving Wartman's horse for Larson to use. The sheriff and Chuck were already at work, bandaging the H Cross foreman, who had been shot through the body.

"What'd you say to make him go for his gun?" demanded the sheriff. The vaquero had not heard the conversation.

Larson told of having had his horse shot, and of what he had asked Wartman regarding a silencer. Sheriff Ranigan grunted, began to fabricate a smoke, and nodded.

"I heard tell he had one last year. Well, let it pass now. You gents get gone towards town before his outfit comes along. Hoskins will raise Cain about this, and I s'pose it'll mean a range war if it ain't stopped, so I aim to stop it if I can. Wartman ain't dead, anyhow."

Larson and Chuck O'Day mounted and headed for town, after changing rigs.

"Riding hosses is an expensive pastime for you, seems like," observed Chuck, when the scene behind had dropped from sight. "Huh! You can leave Wartman's hoss at the livery. I got two there, waiting for me."

It was nearly noon, and Larson knew that Betty Lighton must now be stopping in town for dinner. When they rode in and had left their horses, the first person they ran into was the girl. She greeted them delightedly and bestowed an armful of parcels on them.

"Tote these for me, will you?" she demanded. "I'm going up to Judge Blakey's for noon meat—you'd better come along. The judge will be glad."

"Thanks, no," said Larson hastily. "Your dad said you'd better not forget the mail."

"I'm leaving that until after the stage gets in," she returned. "You've been out to the ranch? You might have let us know you were coming. See you later?"

"After dinner, sure," said Chuck. "We got some buying to do and mail to get, and so forth. You come down to the drug store after you eat, and we'll see if there's any ice cream left in town."

The two friends returned to Main Street, went to the hotel, and sat down to dinner, after sending word to Doc Elders that a patient was en route to his office.

They were nearly through the meal, when Chuck frowned and glanced around. Larson met his look and nodded slightly.

"Something up. Wait."

Two men had entered and departed. Two others came in and each of them sauntered back with elaborate carelessness to the kitchen, and vanished. Presently another man came in and sat at a nearby table.

Chuck greeted him. "Howdy, Slim. I see you're wearin' a deputy's star—what's up?"

The other looked embarrassed. "Nothin' much, I guess," he said.

"Where's that there reg'lar deputy?" demanded Chuck. "Mel Byers ain't sick, is he?"

Slim gave them a curious look. "He's right busy. Heard about Wartman getting shot?"

"Sure," said Chuck promptly. "We done it. Rather, my partner here did. Ranigan come along and it was all right. Wartman ain't dead?"

"Nope."

The swing doors opened. Into the dining-room, a gun in his hand, came Mel Byers, the deputy. He walked up to the table where Larson and Chuck sat, and Chuck nodded.

"Howdy, Mel. Hello! What you wearin' the sheriff's star for?"

Byers was a lanky, determined man. "Because I'm sheriff," he said, and jerked up his gun. "Hands up—pronto! Up! That's right. You jiggers sure had your nerve to ride along into town after killin' Ranigan! Come on, boys we got 'em."

Men flooded into the room.

LOOKING around, after his gun had been taken, he sensed instantly that somehow he and his partner were up against grim reality. He could read it in the faces of the men trooping into the room and clustering around; their very silence was eloquent. Ranigan killed—and by whom? He caught a sight of Miguel, the H Cross vaquero, and kicked Chuck's ankle. Chuck subsided.

"All hands keep quiet," ordered Mel Byers. "The prosecuting attorney will be right along—here he is now. Come on, Hall! Let's have this here straightened out on the spot."

Hall, a raw-boned, rough and ready lawyer, came forward through the crowd, looked at Chuck and Larson with a nod, and pulled up a chair.

"This isn't a trial, boys," he said. "What's more, it isn't a lynching bee. Let's get squared away, and either you're under arrest or you're not. Understood?"

"Shoot," said Larson, giving Chuck another touch of his toe.

"You're Larson, who shot Wartman? Tell us what happened."

Larson obeyed, quietly enough. In the crowd he saw the dark, grinning features of Indian Mose watching him exultantly, and knew the man hated him. When he had finished his story, Hall turned and beckoned Miguel, the vaquero.

"Miguel! Does that tally?"

To the astonishment of Larson, Miguel stated that it did. Miguel had not lied, then!

"Then what happened?" Hall looked at Larson. "Between you and Ranigan?"

"Nothing to happen, was there?" drawled Larson, smiling. He repeated what had passed, told how he and Chuck had come on to town. "You've intimated that we killed Ranigan—if he's dead, we didn't know it. Suppose you answer some questions, yourself, now! Give us the story."

"Right." Hall nodded assent. "When Miguel brought the H Cross outfit to the fork in the trail, Ranigan lay there dead. He had been shot through the heart. Now, Ranigan was about the most popular man in this county, gents. When his body and Wartman were fetched in, and word got around that you two gents were eating dinner here, we just naturally came along to see what you knew about it."

"And you came in force," said Larson. "Who else had passed that way? I've already told you all we know."

"The dust showed the tracks danged plain," spoke up a rider, evidently one of the H Cross outfit. "Nobody else had come, not a soul! That's howcome we knewed who done it."

Chuck started an outburst, but at another kick from Larson, he quieted.

"What sort of a bullet killed the sheriff?" asked Larson.

"Don't know yet—Doc Elders is getting it out."

"Funny a bullet from one of us wouldn't have gone clear through him, isn't it? Look at my gun. I've

used it once. Chuck didn't use his at all."

"That's right!" spoke up Chuck eagerly. "Look at them guns, now—"

"They've each been shot once" said the new sheriff, and a dead silence fell. Chuck stared, open-mouthed, then uttered a dejected oath. "Shucks, I forgot that there side-winder I shot on the road!"

There was a chorus of sarcastic comments, and Chuck began to realize the seriousness of the situation. He told about the sidewinder, and Larson backed him up in the tale.

"Whereabouts was it?" demanded the sheriff. "Ain't much travel on that road; the sign had ought to be there, even if the rattler's et up or gone. Not that we're doubtin' you, Chuck, only this has got to be cleared up fair and square. As it lays now, you're the gent who's suspicioned of this killing. I dunno that the evidence agin' you amounts to a whole lot—"

"I'll have to have the sheriff hold you, Chuck, until we prove up on this here snake story," said Hall gravely. "To be honest, I believe it, and I don't reckon any jury would convict you on this evidence—but just the same, I got my duty to do."

"Sure, that's all right," said Chuck. "Who's goin' to look for that there spot?"

"I'll go," put in the man Slim. Chuck nodded, and described the place in the road with minute care, and Slim departed on his errand.

"I take it, gents," said Larson, "that I'm not accused of anything?"

"You're not" said the sheriff. "Evidence shows Ace brought his trouble on himself."

"Then hand back my gun."

AFTER showing Hall how only one cartridge had been emptied in the weapon, Byers promptly returned it. At this juncture, the thunderstorm cleared and passed just as suddenly as it had ridden. A man came in bearing a twisted bit of lead —the bullet from Ranigan's body. At sight of it, and exclamation burst from Sheriff Byers. "By gosh, boys—this here is a .30-30 and come from a rifle!"

So it proved. When the excited talk died down, Byers at once took charge and brought out from Miguel the vaquero that neither Chuck nor Larson had been carrying a rifle. Instantly the crowd thawed out, and changed in temper, for Chuck O'Day was popular enough himself.

"We'll take it all back—somebody go stop Slim!" exclaimed Hall, and put out his hand to Chuck. "Sorry, Chuck—there's no question now of holding you. The point is, who was out that way this morning with a rifle huh?"

"It's danged funny we didn't hear no shots!" put in one of the H Cross riders. "You know how that there trail curves around—we ain't so far from the fork in a straight line, and we'd ought to've heard any rifle shot."

Larson caught a glance from Chuck, and smiled.

"Boys," he said, addressing the H Cross riders, who were clumped around Miguel, "I may as well tell you and everybody else why Ace Wartman went for his gun."

He told of how his horse had been killed when he first went out to the Lazy S, and of his suspicions in regard to Happy Myers' calves. A derisive laugh broke from the H Cross outfit; their attitude of hostility was undisguised. When he had finished, one of them guffawed.

"Huh! I reckon Ace would of gone into action, feller! I don't know nothing about no silencer—if Ace had one, he ain't got it now."

"How was Ranigan killed this morning, if not by a silenced rifle?" demanded Larson.

"Larson, you're away up in the air," said Sheriff Byers. "Me, I'm frank to say she's a good theory, but she don't hold water. I ain't never heard of such a contraption. Any o' you H Cross boys got anything to offer?"

"Uh-huh," said one, albeit reluctantly. "Ace did have one o' them things last summer. I dunno where it is now."

"Hoskins didn't come with you?" said Chuck.

"Nope. He was up to the north range lookin' over a patch o' loco weed we found."

"Well," said Larson, "if he can throw any light on this silencer affair, I'd sure like to hear from him. What's the answer, Sheriff? Are me and Chuck in your bad graces or not?"

"I reckon not," said Byers, as Hall shook his head. "But there's bein' too danged much shootin' around here. I'm filling out Ranigan's term, and I serve notice on you gents and others that after today there's to be no gun-toting in town, savy? If you boys wants to drag your guns along, you can leave 'em with your hosses or at my office on your way in. This here goes, and anybody who don't believe it can start right in to prove it tomorrow morning."

Larson rose and departed. He passed through the lobby of the hotel and came to a group standing about the verandah. Indian Mose was among them, and made some remark, whereat the others grinned and glanced at Larson.

"Are you hunting trouble?" said Larson, looking at the redskin.

"Not me," said Mose. "I see you got a gun today, huh? Well, today I ain't. So you and me are good friends."

It was said mockingly, derisively. Larson was puzzled.

"What you driving at?" he demanded. Mose spat over the verandah rail.

"Not a thing, mister, not a thing" he returned, with insolent ease.

A TELEGRAM was awaiting him, with word that his dozen head of stock and two punchers from Geronimo were en route and would probably reach Soldado City next day. With this cheerful information pocketed, Larson headed for the drug store and found Betty Lighton just arrived. They got a table and ordered ice cream. Since the girl had heard nothing of the day's doings, Larson told her himself—told the whole story, while she listened wide-eyed.

"Ranigan—killed! Why," she exclaimed, "who would have done it? Except for some of the men whom he's sent to jail, he has no enemies. Nobody out our way, certainly—and with a rifle, you say? It's queer!"

"It's more than queer," said Larson grimly. "Hello—here's Chuck now. Come on, cowboy!"

Chuck O'Day joined them fanning himself vigorously with his hat. Finding that Betty Lighton was informed, he made no bones about speaking clearly.

"You watch out," he said. "Red, that H Cross outfit is going after your scalp—this here means a range war sure as fate! I dunno where Hoskins will stand, but if he don't step in and step quick—"

"You two get out of town," said the girl promptly. "Once the H Cross boys get a chance at liquor, anything may happen. Come along finish that ice cream, Chuck, and we'll go get our mail and all ride out together. You can head our way and then cut across home."

"You're on," said Chuck.

As they were crossing the dusty street to the postoffice, Larson noted something significant. At any other time he might have passed it by, but not today; he was on the alert, sensing things passing under the surface, missing nothing. The mail had been all distributed, the windows opened, and in the crowd around the door was Indian Mose. Betty Lighton looked at the man, and tinge of color came into her cheeks.

"You know Mose, do you?" he asked, as they lined up before the window. She gave him a swift, bird-like glance.

"Of course. We—well, he doesn't come our way any more."

"So? Why not?"

"Oh, a year or more ago, before he went to prison, he came in one day and was drunk, and tried to make believe he owned the place. Dad gave him a terrible thrashing, and he's kept away since."

"Uh-huh!" said Larson thoughtfully. "Went to prison, did he? What for?"

"The sheriff caught him red-hand-

ed with a stolen horse. The old jail had just burned down, so they arranged to send him down to Geronimo on a six months' sentence. Mose had been there a week or so when there was a prison break. Mose chipped in with the guards and got pardoned as a reward. It was irregular sending him there, and was something of a joke all around, but ever since then Mose has been a pretty good citizen."

Larson nodded, but had his doubts as to what kind of a citizen Indian Mose really was.

By the time they got their mail and returned to the street, Chuck was waiting at the rack with the three horses and his own extra mount; that of Wartman had been left at the livery. Larson was just mounting, when Indian Mose came riding past, and gave him a thin-edged smile.

"Hope you have luck with them stock," he observed, and rode on without pause.

Larson did not, for a time, get his meaning, though it was easy to read mockery in words and tone.

The three rode on out of town. When they left the highway, Larson reached in his pocket for the telegram he had received, meaning to tell Chuck about the stock en route, but the yellow slip was gone. He searched his pockets without avail. Then he recalled the words of Indian Mose.

"What you looking for—makin's?" demanded Chuck jocularly.

"Nothing," said Larson.

4

OLD Danny Jenkins and Mike Kelleher were lingering at the Lazy S when Chuck and Larson rode up. They wore an air of sly jubilation, masked by elaborate carelessness.

"What you jiggers doing around here?" demanded Chuck. "I s'pose you been jollying Tia Manuela to hand out some eats, and figger on drawing pay for it, huh?"

"Yep," said Danny, with a wink at Larson. "I dunno's I ever care to do no more real work, I'm feelin' that good."

"Is that so!" said Chuck. "Then s'pose you take care o' these hosses. What with shooting Ace Wartman and Ranigan gettin' killed, we done had a busy day. We got some mail, too."

The two riders stared blankly.

"Huh?" broke out Kelleher. "Who shot Wartman? And what's that about Ranigan—you tryin' to kid us?"

"Better go in to the sheriff's funeral tomorrow afternoon," said Larson. "Wartman ain't dead yet, and I reckon he'll get over it. You ain't heard from Hoskins?"

"Seen him early this morning—he was looking for loco weed and cussing something scandalous," said Danny. "Come on, what's happened? Loosen up! We got news of our own."

"Come on in the house and swap, after you fix up them hosses," said Chuck, and led the way into the house.

The two riders made all haste to join them, and listened to the account of the day's events in open amazement; as yet, they had not heard of the morning's shooting. Then Mike Kelleher gave old Danny a look, and the latter spoke.

"Well, me and Mike were cutting off acrost that west end of the H Cross—you know the place, Chuck, where them low hills and brush and liveoaks lay, where there's always a bunch o' stock to chase out in round-up times? We seen two whopping big rattlers, and Mike says let's get them rattles, so we done it. This was along about the early part of the afternoon—"

"About two o'clock," said Kelleher.

"Yep," agreed Danny. "I reckon it ain't mor'n two-three miles from there to where Ace and Ranigan got shot, neither. Well, as I was sayin' we got them rattlers, and one of 'em had sixteen rattles and a button, too. We had just got the rattles off, when I looked around and seen that the tree right by us—it was one o' them live-oaks, too—had a big holler streak up the side."

"So," and Mike Kelleher took up the tale, "I went and looked in to see was there any more diamond-backs curled up inside, and there wasn't. But there was something else, and I'll give you gents one guess what it was."

"Honey?" said Larson. Danny Jenkins guffawed.

"Honey—by gosh, that's a good one! Any time you find a honey-tree in these parts, you'll be going some! No, it wan't no honey. It was a .30-30 Winchester with a box of ca'tridges, that's what it was! And the rifle had a contraption on the end, a silencer."

If the two riders had expected to create a sensation with this news, they were fully gratified.

"My good gosh!" exclaimed Chuck, sitting up straight and staring at them. "You sure?"

"Ain't blind," said Danny curtly.

"Was the rifle in good shape?" demanded Larson, a light in his eyes. Mike nodded.

"Yep. It wan't no accident. She'd been right well cared for, but didn't have no marks on her of any kind. Looked like she'd just been cleaned up 'fore we found her—fresh oil on her. We put her right back like we'd found her, real careful. So now I reckon you know howcome hosses and things get killed, huh? Not to mention the sheriff."

CHUCK rumpled up his hair excitedly and swung around to Larson.

"You see, Red? That feller shot Ranigan, then come back and laid up the rifle again—it's been hid all the while! By gosh, we got the whole danged thing in our hands!"

"All except the man," said Larson. "And we'd have the man, if we hadn't met up with Ace Wartman this morning—we'd have jumped to the conclusion that he was the owner of the rifle. You see? It's there on the H Cross range; we know he bought the silencer last summer; he gave out that somebody had stolen it or it was lost, to shield himself—the circumstantial evidence is perfect! But it's false, just the same. Wartman certainly did not kill Ranigan—"

"We don't know that Ranigan was shot with the silenced rifle," interposed Chuck.

"No, but the inference is clear enough—fresh oil on the weapon, remember! And the H Cross boys wondered that they hadn't heard the shot. Now who'd be using that rifle to shoot at men, horses, and calves? Not just any ordinary puncher; that's dead sure! Those things aren't done without a reason. Either they were done out of hatred, or out of deliberate planning, or both. We'd naturally blame either Hoskins or his foreman."

"And we'd fly off the handle and raise h— and get off on the wrong foot, uh-huh!" said Chuck O'Day sagely. "I don't reckon Hoskins done it at all, Red. That ain't like him. He might have tried to ruin Happy, sure—"

"Aw, shucks!" broke in Danny Jenkins. "Hoskins didn't kill Happy, anyhow!"

"Huh?" Larson looked at him quickly. "What you mean?"

Mike Kelleher grinned. "That there rifle wasn't the only thing in the tree, Larson! They was a old brown wallet, Happy Myers' old wallet, with a wad o' banknotes in it. We let it lay, real careful."

Larson whistled. Here was news, with a vengeance!

The unknown murderer of Happy, then, was the owner of the silencer rifle—the killer of Sheriff Ranigan, the man who had shot horses and calves and men from ambush! No, this practically let Hoskins out of it. Ace Wartman was eliminated. There remained the damning circumstance that the hiding-place was on the H Cross range.

"What about Hoskins' outfit?" demanded Larson, looking around. "You boys probably know 'em all. Might it be one of them?"

"Anything's possible," said old Danny. "They ain't no angel crew, by gosh!"

"All right," said Larson decisively. "Then the thing for us to do is to watch that tree day and night. Mike, s'pose you take the first spell, and

Danny can relieve you in the morning. Arrange the place with him, but hide up somewhere in full view of that tree. Chuck, give him your glasses."

"Sure." Chuck took the field-glasses from the desk and handed them to Kelleher.

"Take along a rifle?" demanded the latter hopefully.

"Not a bit of it," said Larson. "All we want, is to discover who that man is! Then we'll have him, and we'll get him. He may not come for days, but no matter—he'll show up sooner or later for some of his blood-money, or else for the rifle. It's somebody who took no chances on being searched and having the money found on him."

"You thought Injun Mose done the murder," said Chuck. "This'd mean—"

"This would mean too danged much to do any thinking about!" snapped Larson. "If it was Mose, why would he hide out the stuff on the H Cross range?"

"To keep himself clear, maybe."

"Maybe just the same, we'll wait and be sure what we're doing. Mike, you'd better take along some grub—get it from Tia Manuela."

"No, I'll stop at our own place," said Kelleher. "I got to go near there anyhow to reach the west range, and I'll pick up my roll as well."

"All right. I got some steers coming up the road, and we'll go meet 'em."

"You got some steers coming up the road?" repeated Chuck, astonished.

Larson told of the stock he had coming, and of the telegram he had received. Chuck went up in the air.

"Dog gone! You went and lost that there telegram—now I know what that cuss Mose meant by what he said! You went and lost it, and he found it, huh? It'd be just like him to go meet your two riders and send 'em 'way off to—and gone acrost the range—dang it all! I'm goin' with you in the morning my own self."

"Then we won't need Miguel and Bisby. Get off, Mike! Both of you."

The two riders departed.

DARKNESS had fallen, and Chuck and Larson, having the books at last in shape and the partnership agreement signed and put away, were preparing for bed, when there was a call from outside. The visitor proved to be Hoskins, alone.

"Howdy, boys," he said amiably. "Just heard about the doings today, and come right over."

"Make yourself to home," said Chuck.

Hoskins took a chair.

"Gents, we got to have a showdown, all over again," he exclaimed. "That there outfit of mine is danged hard to keep in bounds, lemme tell you! The only bit of luck about it is that Ace ain't dead and won't die, neither, if he has any luck."

"You heard about Ranigan?" asked Larson, and the rancher nodded.

"Yep. What I want to do is to square things off with you-all and keep any range war from busting out. Things are ripe this minute to lead anywhere—"

"They're riper than you know," said Chuck grimly, and told about the discovery of the hollow tree and the rifle and money.

"Then it's that danged Injun Mose, just like we figured!"

"We don't know it," objected Larson quietly. "We haven't got a single thing on him, so far as the law goes. And remember, that tree is on your range, Hoskins. It might be any one of your men. Personally, I don't believe it is, I'll meet you halfway in anything you can suggest to ward off the explosion. How about our two outfits getting together, and having a straight talk?"

"That's a right good notion," agreed Hoskins. "You know's well as I do that talk from you nor me wouldn't do a mite of good—orders, that is. But if we could get all hands together, and clean out every bit of hard feelin's and make it plain that neither you-all nor me would stand for any range war foolishness, then we'd pull clear. Meantime, we got to find that feller."

"I'm arranging for that," said Larson, and went on to tell of the watch being kept on the tree. "S'pose you see that your men don't go near that

range tomorrow. When shall we pull off the meeting? Tomorrow night?"

"If you like," said Hoskins. "Where?"

"S'pose we say my old place," said Chuck O'Day. "It's about halfway from here. After supper tomorrow night?"

"Suits me," agreed Hopkins.

"Been to town?" asked Larson.

"Nope; on my way now, to see Ace. Couple o' the boys come back and give us all the news, and the rest are there—drinking, I reckon. So long, gents, and much obliged. We'll talk over that feller and the tree tomorrow night, and arrange to get him, huh?"

"You bet," assented Larson. "Might be a good idea to tell the new sheriff about it, too."

"I'll do that," said Hoskins approvingly. "Byers is a right good jasper. If it's that there Injun, we'll sure as—fix him, believe me! The boys said he was drunk and ugly this afternoon, in town. He's bad, he is. Well, so long."

THEY SAW Hoskins off, and headed for bed. They were just ready to blow out the light when Mike Kelleher arrived with a shout, and came stamping through the house.

"This ain't no time to sleep!" he said, grinning at sight of them. "Say, that there rifle is clear gone from the tree!"

"Gone?" said Larson. "No sign of who took it?"

"Nope. The ca'tridge box is there, likewise the wallet, but the jasper has come and lifted the gun."

"Then get back and watch for him to replace it," said Larson. "Somebody else'll get drilled tomorrow. Get back on the job, Mike."

It was still dark the next morning when Tia Manuela shook Larson awake, and departed, yawningly, to get breakfast ready.

Shaved and ready, they sat down to breakfast by lamplight, and were in the middle of the meal when a hail announced a visitor. In came Sheriff Byers, alone.

"Set down and join us," Chuck greeted him cordially. "Just headin' for town—got some stock comin' up from down below and aim to meet 'em. You're getting to be an awful early jigger, ain't you? After a criminal?"

"I dunno what I'm after," said Byers, sinking into a chair and regarding them. "I'm all mixed up!"

"You're not the only one," and Larson grinned. "What's on your mind? I s'pose Hoskins told you about our arrangement?"

"Huh?" Byers looked at him fixedly.

"Hoskins was here last night," and Larson went on to describe their agreement. "He aimed to tell you the whole thing so you'd be prepared—about the hollow tree and so on. Didn't you see him?"

"Hoskins didn't get to town last night," said the sheriff slowly. Larson sprang to his feet.

"You mean to say Hoskins is dead?"

Byers nodded. Larson looked at his partner.

"Told you so, huh?"

Between them, they apprised Byers of Mike Kelleher's return with word that the rifle was gone. Byers pulled his chair up to the table.

"It beats me," he said. "The worst of it is, Hoskins was found by one of his outfit goin' home real late last night—he had been shot just where he was leaving your road for the highway. His hoss wasn't hurt. He'd been drilled through the heart—bullet clean through him. Whoever done it, must have laid on that ridge, where the brush is, above the road, waiting."

"Might have took him for one of us," suggested Chuck. "It was a dark night, no moon showing, and him coming from here like that—"

"Dang it all, who'd be laying out there waiting!" broke out the sheriff. "Oh, I ain't charging you boys with it; I'm durned well satisfied about you two, but I dunno where to get off."

"Don't get off," said Larson. "Stay here. With our outfit watching that hollow tree, you'll likely get word from one of them that the jigger brought back his rifle—and was recognized. Get our outfit for a posse,

and go get him. How's the proposition strike you?"

"Fine," said Byers, with renewed hope. "Looks good, Larson. But for —sake keep out o' town! The feller that found Hoskins took him to town, and I reckon the hull H Cross outfit will be there by now. That's another reason I come out here, to head things off, in case that outfit comes out this way."

"All right," said Larson, as Chuck nodded. "The place is yours, and we'll stay out of sight a while—huh, Chuck?"

THE TWO riders rode on in silence as sunrise broadened into day. The morning was wearing on when they came into Eagle Canyon—a small, narrow valley with a trail wending eastward. Chuck announced that they were a scant mile from the south road, having circled Soldado City. They dismounted to roll cigarettes and rest their horses.

An hour later they came to the narrow canyon mouth with the highway just beyond, when into sight drifted a gentleman of extremely bedraggled appearance. He held a half-filled or rather half-emptied bottle in one hand, and was lifting his voice in song.

"Charley Scott," said Chuck, with a sniff. "Been making a night of it by his looks, ain't he? Bet he don't know me."

Chuck lost. Mr. Scott drew rein, wagged his head solemnly, and ended his song.

"Hyuh, boysh!" he said. "I dunno how many of you there are, but thash Chuck O'Day in the lead or I'm a liar! Don't you head for town, Chuck."

"Howdy, Charley. Why not?"

"Ain't shafe. Howcome you killed Hoskins?"

"Didn't do it," said Chuck.

"You're a liar," said Mr. Scott amiably. "Witnesh says you did."

"Here, straighten up!" snapped Larson. "Witness? What witness you talking about?"

Mr. Scott peered at him blinkingly. "I dunno," he said. "Anyhow, Mose allowed you'd done it. Shomebody—"

They rode on, and left Mr. Scott complaining to the morning sunlight about their lack of politeness.

"Don't prove nothing," said Chuck.

Larson was pondering this information frowningly.

"No we can't depend on what this gent says. Mose is tryin' to stir up trouble, just the same—savvy? Except for Byers, he could start a range war in ten minutes, and I ain't sure Byers can stop it now."

They came into the main road, which here, south of town, ran through anything but good country—dessicated buttes, eroded into fantastic shapes, rising on every side.

"Two miles beyond," said Chuck, "Swede Yonson has got him a right smart little place, with an artesian well. Most likely, your two boys will stop there for water, and we're liable to pick 'em up any minute now. If we—what's that?"

Three revolver shots, followed by two more, lifted on the silence from close ahead, where the road was closed to sight.

"We've picked 'em up," said Larson grimly. "Come on."

Chuck wheeled his horse out of the road, following a draw or dry wash that led off to the left, around a sandstone pinnacle. Larson followed, unquestioning. Another shot and another broke on the hot morning sunlight.

The two horses plunged at the steep sandy slope ahead, and after what seemed an interminable time surmounted the twisting slope and came out upon a hillflank above the road—Chuck evidently knew the place well. Chuck slipped from the saddle, and Larson followed suit.

Directly below and ahead, was a sweep of dust on the road—and through it Larson made out a fallen horse, a fallen steer, a rider whose horse was plunging frantically. Even as he looked, the plunging horse went down, though he heard no shot.

No need to hear, however! A scant two hundred yards to the left, where the hill-flank swept around, was the silent killer—a dark shape against the whitish rock, with the figure of a waiting horse behind, well out of sight from the road below. Larson adjusted his rifle-sights, took steady

aim, fired; he pumped the rifle, aimed again, fired. The figure of the horse sprawled down, kicking.

"Got him," he said. "Chuck! Get to town in a hurry—bring the H Cross outfit and anyone else you can raise. This devil can't get away now—I'll hold him. Ride like—!"

LARSON saw at a glance that there was nothing left to tell the straggling party of a dozen men who left their horses and followed Chuck to where he was standing. Chuck had told them everything. Now, in the hot white noonday sunlight, they greeted Larson somewhat shamefacedly, but with a resolute air that spoke volumes.

"Where is he?" demanded Chuck. Larson pointed to the rocky pinnacle off to the left.

"There. Those two men of mine weren't hurt to speak of. They've got our two rifles and are holding him."

The sharp report of shots punctuated his words.

"Nothing to do but close in on him, huh?" said somebody.

"That's enough," said Larson. "Who's got a rifle for me?"

The whole party were armed. Someone handed him a rifle and a handful of extra loads, and the group scattered.

Up on his rocky pinnacle at one end of the hill-flank, Indian Mose lay crouched among his sheltering rocks. He was indeed well shielded.

Even now, he scarce knew how it had happened—the shooting of his horse had stranded him. When he tried to slip away, two rifles held him cornered, blank, eroded slopes all around, scant shelter anywhere but here where he lay. Lead spattering around him drove him here to shelter—unexpected lead, for men rarely carried rifles hereabouts.

Waterless—striking like a cornered rattler—conserving his cartridges, Indian Mose fought. He neither squealed nor whined; somehow, by some chance, they had the goods on him, and he accepted the situation with a curse and a shot.

Numbers quelled him—bullets pouring up at his shelter, lead splattering and ricocheting all around so that he dared not show his head. Inch by inch he changed position, found a cranny, leveled his rifle with the long silencer on the end.

Spat! Smokeless powder, inaudible report—he had advantages with him, and grinned as a man toppled and lay outsprawled in the sunlight.

Mose gave a convulsive jerk. The rifle dropped from his hands. His eyes closed, and he sank back against the rock behind him. A shadow fell across him, wakened him. He looked up to see Larson standing there, gun in hand. Like a flash his hand moved, and the revolver barked—too late. The report was drowned in the smash of Larson's gun. The broken wrist fell limp.

They came crowding around, staring at the hurt man there, whose dark eyes stared back at them with savage dying hatred. He cursed.

"Blast you—all of you!" muttered Mose thickly. "I paid you out—paid out Myers—paid out Hoskins and Ranigan—"

He shivered, and for an instant his eyes closed. Then they opened widely, opened in a fixed and glassy stare that saw nothing earthly.

"I reckon this clears up everything, don't it?" said Chuck O'Day, as he and Larson stood to one side. "One o' them fine steers is dead—we'll get the others in all right, and cheap at the price. Huh?"

Larson nodded, squinting down at the cattle scattered along the road.

"I expect we're all clear," he said. "All except one thing. Reckon you and them two riders of mine can get the stock home?"

"We'd ought to," said Chuck. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing much." Larson gave him a look and a smile. "But I reckon I'll take the news myself over to the Figure Four."

"Dog gone it!" said Chuck plaintively. "I knew it was coming!"

THE END

Play it Smart, Lawdog!

by W. F. Reynolds

Clay Bolton would never have much money on his Town Marshal's salary, he knew. And Clay had reason for wanting a fair pile of his own. So he decided to be smart . . .

TOWN MARSHAL Clay Bolton, feet on his desk, saw the buckboard behind the sweating mustangs, roll down Windup's main street, and turn in at the wagon yard. He saw Dick Nelson leap down, and reach up a hand for his sister, Chris.

There was a sudden edge to the discontent that had stirred in Clay lately, a regret he tried to put down. He figured he could have been going to High Boy Creek, and trying his horse in front of the Nelson's homestead shack; there was always a shy welcome in Chris Nelson's blue eyes when she looked at Clay.

But hell, a man couldn't get ahead tied down on a two-bit homestead, seeing his crop dry up, and blow away, and his wife get thin and hungry...

Dick Nelson got back in the buckboard and drove out of Clay's sight while Chris stood waiting. He watched her easy stance, her slender body supple and graceful under the thin calico dress. He could see the sheen of her auburn hair from under the pushed back sunbonnet.

Clay shifted his chair around, swung his feet down and reached for tobacco and papers. Damned if he'd back out now. He had made his deal with Nick Weil and he'd stick to it; he had his stake coming.

Clay applied a match to his cigarette and scowled at his feet. Time enough to think of a woman when he had his pockets lined with cash. He had already put it off too long; Weil had stepped in now. But the present situation had its advantages. Weil, and his gunhand, Joca, would do the dirty work. All Bolton had to do was close an official eye.

But Weil was ruthless; he'd bear watching. And he'd be watched. Clay Bolton was the law in Windup now; he'd built his reputation carefully through years of being the town's errand and chore boy, taking the scant meals and hard work, and now for three years he had enforced the law carefully and scrupulously. He would watch Weil, and in a few more years Clay Bolton would be the power in this country.

Clay got up and threw away his smoke, his square jaw tight, the discontent putting a raw edge to his temper. He jerked his hat down hard and left the office. He found himself going toward the wagon yard and stopped abruptly, turning back angrily.

The next damn thing he'd be mooning around that nester gal like a fool farmer...

"Oh, Clay!" He turned back reluctantly to see Mrs. Minson, a widow, small and gray with labor stiffened hands and bent back. She supported a wastrel son by taking Windup's washing, and knitting

sweaters and socks for the townspeople.

A month ago, she had asked Clay to try and straighten Bill Minson out. In a saloon brawl, Clay had put the fear of the devil into Bill. He thought it had taken.

She was beaming at him, faded eyes full of gratitude and affection for him. "I wanted to tell you about Bill, Clay."

"How is Bill, Mrs. Minson?"

"Still workin' on the Nine Ten ranch. He likes it, he says. He sent his pay in yesterday by the foreman. He wants me to quit washin' and move out to the ranch!"

"That's fine."

She was fumbling in the huge black bag she always carried, and she pulled out a beautifully knitted pair of socks and handed them to Clay.

"I knitted them special for you, Clay," she beamed at him. "They'll be mighty handy this winter."

"You shouldn't have done that, ma'am," he protested and it seemed to him that those faded eyes would probe clear to his heart and see the black thing there that he planned.

"It's little enough after what you done for my Bill," she said and hurried away.

CLAY'S guilty embarassment grew as he glanced up and saw Joe King standing in the doorway of his store, smiling, nodding his full approval. Clay hurried on with a muttered greeting to King, stuffing the socks in his pocket. Hal Gorse of the gunshop yelled a friendly greeting as Clay passed.

These people trusted him, had full confidence in him as a man and officer—and he was ready to betray them. Clay cursed under his breath; damn it, did they have to rub it in?

He halted suddenly. In his confusion he had come on toward the wagon yard. Twenty feet away stood the Nelsons. Chris was hanging onto her brother's arm, both were facing Joca ten feet in front of them. Then Clay's eyes, suddenly hard and violent, were riveted on Joca.

The little gunman was a plain hired gun, the killer-for-pay type. His gray-green eyes were hot with a cruel pleasure now, and his hands hung over the twin, tied-down guns.

He was a recent acquirement of Weil's, and Clay had let him stay. A month ago a man of Joca's type wouldn't have dared let his saddle blanket get cold in Windup.

Chris' desperate glance fell on Clay and instantly her eyes were full of relief. He'd have to break this up, Clay thought. He knew it was part of Weil's plan to scare the Nelsons out; with them gone the others would leave, too. But Clay saw instantly that this was more than a scare. Joca aimed to kill Dick Nelson; it was plain in his little mean eyes.

"You're yellow, Nelson!" Joca said. "You can talk big but you can't back it up. You been tellin' a mess of lies on me and Rose over at the *O Aces*. Back up your lies!"

"You've got something wrong," Dick Nelson said, and his youthful voice was tight and squeezed. "I ain't said nothing about you and Rose."

"You're a liar!"

"That's all, Joca," Clay said stopping before the little gunman. "Clear out of here!"

Joca's thin face was suddenly loose with violent rage, his eyes flared murderously at Clay. "Keep outa this, lawdog! It ain't your business!"

"I'm making it mine. I'm telling you what for! Git!"

"You ain't tellin' me nothin'!" Joca snarled. "Your time's about up in this town, Bolton; it's damn short!"

Clay's face went white. His rage burned at Joca from brilliant blue eyes. He bent a little, hands hooked over his guns.

"Joca," Clay said with soft deadliness, "you've got just five seconds. Pull that gun or git!"

It made Clay even more angry to know that he was unnecessarily forcing a fight. Joca could have been handled easier, knowing that Clay had an agreement with his boss. But the guilt in Clay sent his rage boiling—to have a man defy him where

he had scrupulously enforced the law.

Joca saw that killing rage and it cooled him, put a doubt in him. Clay saw the flicker of Joca's eyes and knew he had won. The little gunman would back down—this time.

"Bolton, I aim to see you!" Joca was snarling as he backed away. "Don't think you'll get away with this! I'll gut-shoot you before I leave this town!"

CLAY SLOWLY straightened and some of the hot rage drained out of him as Joca whirled and strode away toward Weil's *O Aces* saloon. He turned to look at the Nelsons, and was tight again as he saw the gratitude in their eyes.

"Much obliged, marshal," Dick said. "He was after my scalp." Then he burst out, "that damn Weil!"

"You better leave town soon as you can, Nelson," Clay said. "Joca ain't the kind to quit."

"We will, soon as we see Mr. Neece," Chris said. She was looking at Clay and behind the softness in her eyes was a small doubt. "Thank you again, Clay."

"What's this town come to, anyway?" Dick said angrily. "Can't a man come to town anymore without having a gunman jump down his throat?" His hot young eyes were on Clay, wanting an answer.

"Stay out of his way till he cools off, Dick," Clay said and knew it was a lame answer. He turned abruptly away, wanting to get away from Chris' probing eyes. He knew they were staring after him and his jaw tightened grimly.

As he passed the gunshop, Hal Gorse said, "Joca is getting mighty bold lately, Clay; acts like he feels real safe."

"I'll have to see Weil," Clay said tightly. "He hired Joca to see after his out of town interests; he's been walking easy in town."

"It was a nice town till them two showed up," Gorse said. "We could do without them real easy."

It was a plain hint, and as he moved on Clay could feel Gorse's eyes on his back. The gunsmith was no fool; he'd have to see Weil all right, Clay thought, tell him to close-herd Joca in town.

He turned into his office and sat down at the desk. Across the street he could see Chris and Dick, hanging around close to the bank, waiting for Neece to come back from dinner. Chris seemed to be pleading with Dick about something.

Then he knew what it was as he saw Dick reluctantly unbuckle his gunbelt and hand it to Chris. She came across the street toward the marshal's office while Dick Nelson stared bitterly after her. Then he transferred his stare to Weil and Joca where they stood on the porch of Weil's *O Aces*.

Clay didn't miss the significant glance Weil exchanged with Joca. Joca went into the bar and Weil leaned against a porch column, muddy eyes on Chris as she came across the street.

Clay stood up as Chris entered and laid Dick's gun and belt on the desk. "I talked Dick into letting you keep his gun until we were ready to leave town, Clay." She looked at him from worried blue eyes. "Do you think I did right? Joca won't dare shoot Dick and him unarmed, will he?"

"He'd better not!" he said it with such vehemence that Chris looked at him startled. Clay looked down at his hands to hide his eyes, and started building a smoke. "Chris, do you think you folks can really make a go of that flat out on High Boy Creek? With no water?"

"We have water, Clay, in High Boy Creek. All we need is a dam, and we're planning one. It's what Dick and I want to see Mr. Neece about, to get the money."

"Neece is a banker," Clay said. "He don't lend money without security." He hated to be so blunt but if he could convince her, it would save a lot of trouble.

"We'll build some way, even if he don't," she said; "we won't be stopped." She looked at Clay and her blue eyes held an earnest enthusiasm. "It's wonderful land out there, Clay. Just picture it waving with alfalfa and wheat and oats, and— Oh, anything will grow there!

A person could be content there."

Her eyes had grown dreamy, but abruptly they were wide with worry again. She stepped forward and caught his arm. "Clay, please keep an eye on Dick until we can leave town. Joca aimed to kill him out there. He's a bad man. Dick wouldn't have a chance against him. Will you, please, keep an eye on him, Clay?"

"All right, Chris," he said and she seemed not to notice the uneasiness in his eyes, how they refused to meet hers.

"Thank you, Clay," she said softly and her hand tightened on his arm a moment and her eyes were warm as she looked up at him.

SHE LEFT then and he stared after her, his breathing thick and erratic. "Confound that woman!" he suddenly growled. "She makes it hard as hell for a man!"

He saw her join Dick, and as Neece entered the bank, they went in after him. Clay turned back and dropped into his chair and scowled at the wall. Why was everybody so grateful to him lately? Why the hell couldn't he find plenty to grumble about as he had when he was a kid and practically starving? Or had he just imagined it then?

To hell with it. He reached for tobacco and papers and built a smoke. He hadn't bowed and scraped in this town all these years for nothing. He didn't aim to end up on twobit farm either. Not when he could have half the country. Him and Weil...

Your time is about up in this town, Bolton. It's damn short.

Those words of Joca's brought up another line of thought that Clay had been skirting around lately. Weil wasn't the kind who split his ill-gotten gains; he was whole hog. He could easy figure he didn't need a tank town marshal for long.

It would suit Weil to have a lawman for a fall guy. A lawman gone crooked, one who had been liked and respected, would throw up a lot of smoke. The smoke would hide a lot of meanness; it would give someone time to pull off a neat job and be gone before anyone was the wiser.

"Sleepin' again, Bolton? Or is it, yet?" a soft voice said. But under the softness was a hard anger.

Clay looked up at Weil in the doorway. The saloonman was big with a supple bigness. There was just the shadow of a sag under the strong chin. His eyes were opaque and muddy. He was dressed in the latest fashion, checkered suit and white shirt, and hard hat.

"Just thinking of something a man said," Clay returned evenly. "And wondering."

"I'm wonderin', too," Weil said. "I saw that deal at the wagon yard awhile ago. Why the hell did you break it up? Joca had him flat."

"Joca was aiming to kill Dick," Clay said; "the agreement was to scare the nesters out, not kill them."

Weil's opaque eyes studied Clay for a long moment, and his anger showed only in his tight set jaw. Finally he said, "We've got to move fast, Bolton; it's been raining a week up in the mountains. High Boy Creek is comin' up. That damn Dick Nelson and his sister have got them hoe hands turning the creek into that old lake bed, digging a ditch!"

"So what, it'll run out the other end," Clay said and despite his contempt for hoemen, he felt a glow of admiration for their determination.

"The hell it'll run out!" Weil snarled. "Not when they're hauling pottery clay from Yellow Cliff and throwin' it and gravel into the openin'! They'll have plenty of water for this crop. We've got to act or we're lost. You let me do this my way. Just keep outa the way!"

"I don't go for murder, Weil."

"You block me, Bolton, and Joca might have another job!" There was no attempt to veil the threat.

Clay stood up and the temper flared violently in him. "Maybe you'd like to try it, Weil?"

Weil didn't move. "You've got till the Nelsons leave the bank, Bolton. Better not make no mistake this time. It could be your last one!" Weil turned and stalked across the street toward his saloon, his shiny boots making small puffs of dust in the dry street.

CLAY SAT on his desk and stared at the floor, he found himself thinking again of the Nelsons. Those kids had what it took all right. They were fighting, and in the face of terriffic odds. No money. And they had those hoemen digging a ditch and holding the water with clay and gravel!

If he remembered rightly, that lake bed would hold a lot of water. Fifty farms could be irrigated if it was dammed to the top of the old outlet. Dirt wouldn't hold it, but like Weil said, it would for a crop. It would be hard work, but if Neece didn't let them have the money, get behind them, they could do this over each year until they could afford to build a dam themselves!

Clay grinned a little then the grin faded. A pair of kids against a pair of killers! Dick wasn't a day over eighteen and Chris maybe a year or two older. Two kids, two killers, and a damn crooked marshal...

Shame was a heavy weight in Clay and his face was hot. He shoved his hands into his pockets, teeth clinching. Didn't a man have a right to his stake? Maybe he did, but by the same token, those kids had their rights, too.

Movement across the street caught Clay's attention and he welcomed it as a man will whose thoughts don't please him. He saw Weil go in the saloon and Joca saunter over and lean on the porch of the bank, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

Clay scowled then drew his guns, one after the other, and checked the well oiled mechanisms. He eased them back into his holsters and waited, eyes on the bank.

In a few minutes, the Nelsons came out of the bank and Joca stepped into the street and turned to face them. Clay heard his voice raised in shrill curses, saw him hunched over, hands spread over his guns.

"Are you goin' to fight, you yellow whelp?" Joca ended snarling.

"I ain't got a gun, Joca," Dick said and Clay could detect the desperate tremble in the boy's voice.

"You low murderer!" Chris blazed at Joca. "You dare shoot Dick and I'll kill you myself! You'd better shoot me, too!" Her face was deathly white, and she seemed to know that Joca would not be stopped this time.

"Don't make me belly-shoot you, Nelson!" Joca yelled. "You ain't goin' to crawl outa it this time. Here!" He drew his left hand gun and tossed it toward Dick. It fell three feet short of Dick as Joca had intended. "Pick it up and fight, damn you! Back up them lies you been tellin'!"

The gun lay there glinting in the warm spring sun, and Dick Nelson stood rooted, wide eyes on that gun. He was trapped and he knew it. If he refused to reach for the gun, he would be hounded out of the country by Joca and his ilk. If he reached for the gun he was a dead man.

Clay saw Dick's throat muscles work as he tried to swallow and couldn't. Neece and one of his tellers came out of the bank and grabbed Chris and began hauling her, kicking and screaming, back out of line of possible bullets.

CLAY STEPPED out of the doorway of his office and went toward them, jaw set, muttering bitter curses at himself.

Dick Nelson stood alone now facing Joca, and Clay saw him tense. The kid had guts; he was going to try for that gun.

"No! Dick, don't do it!" Chris screamed and struggled with Neece and the teller. "Don't do it, Dick!"

"Grab it, you yellow whelp!" Joca yelled on a rising note of triumph.

"Turn around, Joca," Clay said. "You're under arrest. Just turn around and be right easy about it!"

Joca spun around face flaming with wild rage. "Who's talkin'! Damn you, lawdog, I told you—" His eyes flared wide and his hand snapped to his gun.

Their guns roared together. Then Clay's right gun fell to the ground as Joca's bullet smashed his arm. But his left gun was out now and it bucked in his hand, then again. Joca reeled in a wide circle and crumpled

abruptly to the dust, shirt reddening; he twisted a moment and was still.

Chris was tugging at Clay's shirt and he heard it rip under hand. She bound her scarf around the torn bicep. Clay looked down at her, and in his eyes were all the things he knew he had missed now. He felt her hands tremble on his arm.

"It's all right, Chris," he said. "It'll keep till I've finished." He was walking away then, toward the *O Aces*, and the rage filled face he saw leave the batwings.

Clay stopped suddenly and turned. Might as well do it up brown long as he was making a fool out of himself. "Dick," he said, "get M yor Tompson; have him come to my office. I have something to tell him." He started on again, and his steps were springy and sure.

He went through the batwings, skirted the long bar, not looking at the silent faces that stared at him, and pushed into Weil's office. The saloonman sat there facing him, a gun held loosely in his hand, pointing at the floor.

"The noble lawman," Weil sneered.

"You're under arrest, Weil," Clay said.

"For what, lawman?"

"For maybe nothing in the end," Clay said. "But it'll break your power here; you'll be hung when I get done talking if you don't leave town. You're smart enough to know that!"

"Yes, I know that," Weil agreed calmly enough, but in his muddy eyes was a terrible, frustrated rage. "You're a fool, Bolton. We had this made, and you had to spoil it over a skirt; which makes it necessary for me to kill you!"

"You can't, Weil, but if you did, the same purpose would be accomplished. You'd have to hit the road."

"On the contrary, Bolton. I've suspected lately that you were too goody-goody to go through with this, so I took precautions. I've just planted those precautions among Joca's effects in the back room here where he sleeps."

"I'm listening, but make it quick. You and me have a date with the mayor!"

"As you know, officially, Joca was my bookkeeper. I've got my books juggled so it looks like I was being robbed. In Joca's effects we'll find another book of his own records. You figure way up there, Bolton; he paid you plenty! Even enough of our plans are there, but only about the town, to make people think it was you and him. I'll be clear, Bolton, and a hero for killin' you!"

"The only thing wrong with your plan is killing me, Weil," Clay said grimly. "You ain't man enough."

Weil looked at Clay's useless right arm, then at the holstered gun on his left leg. Weil laughed, a hard merciless sound. "You're good as dead now, Bolton."

CLAY THOUGHT, *Weil was watching that fight out there, but he probably couldn't describe it accurately; no one hardly ever did. Each man always argued hotly about his own version.*

Clay smiled a little. "Did you notice which gun killed Joca, Weil? The left wasn't it? Most people still don't know that my right gun is a bluff! I can nail you dead center before you can get off a shot!"

He'd known Weil was hard, of course, and merciless, but he hadn't wanted a bullet in the back; and walking in with a drawn gun might have gotten him that. But Weil had planned such a possibility ahead. He had Clay in a bad spot.

Weil's gun hand tensed and Clay forced the smile to widen a little on his stiff lips. He thought he saw the faint flicker of doubt in the saloonman's eyes.

"Better drop it, Weil!" Clay said softly.

Weil relaxed a little and his thin lips loosened in a small smile of a gambler who had lost a pot. "All right, Clay, looks like you win again..."

But his tightening jaw warned Clay of his intentions, and he dug for his gun. Too slow. But he had instilled a doubt in Weil's mind, and the saloonman's snapped shot was too hasty. It missed. His second shot

hit Clay in the flesh of the hip, and spun him around, making the third bullet glance off a rib.

Then Clay's gun was slamming in the little room as he nailed the mushrooms of smoke in front of Weil.

Clay was braced against the wall, looking down at Weil who had spilled from his chair to the floor, his white shirt reddening with the blood that poured from his chest. Clay coughed weakly as the swirling fumes of burnt powder choked him.

He still leaned there when the first of the cautious men eased in from the barroom. They carried Clay out and put him on a table, and one ran for the doctor.

Later that evening, after his wounds were treated, and all but Tompson and Chris had left his hotel room, Clay knew that this was the end. It was time to ride on now; there was a sickness in him at the thought.

But a man made his mistake, and he paid for it.

He clamped his teeth against the pain of his wounds as he sat up in bed. He stopped Chris' quick protest with a lifted hand.

"I had an agreement with Weil," he said. "Not the murder part, but enough. I was in with them; I'll ride on now."

Tompson looked at Chris, his face solemn, and his bald head glistening in the light from the window. "Chris, did you hear anything? For a second, I thought Clay had said something!"

Together they pushed him flat on his back, and suddenly he didn't have the strength to resist them. He stared at Tompson and Chris in unbelief.

"He's delirious," Chris said softly. "He never was very bright anyway!" There were tears in her eyes. "I'm going to start smartening him up a little!"

Tompson stood up and moved to the door. "You watch Clay, Chris," he said. "While he's delirious, and don't let him be talking foolish. I aim to go see Neece about a loan to the homesteaders. I hear they need a dam!" He winked at Clay, and closed the door softly behind him.

Clay swallowed several times, and when he finally looked at Chris he couldn't mistake the soft glow in her eyes. Still hardly believing he wasn't delirious, Clay suddenly caught up her small hand.

"Chris," he asked, "do you reckon there's a vacant homestead on High Boy Creek that a addle pated ex-marshal could file on?"

Her eyes were suddenly bright with happiness, and her cheek pressed against his own. "I think so, Clay. In fact, I'm sure of it!"

THE END

Benson laughed and slammed the bent stick at Judge Able Cain.

ABLE CAIN'S PLAGUE

by A. A. Baker

Bob Benson was a one-man plague in Apex, so Judge Able Cain decided to fight fire with fire.

THE MINERS in the *Donner Saloon* were crowded back against the walls to allow the two combatants plenty of fighting room. The savage blows that were being struck could be felt by the last man in the crowd that clustered around the open doors. Most of the blows were landing on the head of Judge Able Cain, because his coat had become wrapped around his head and he couldn't see a thing. Bob Benson was holding the coat and his freckled hairy fists were doing the smashing.

This was an old feud that had its birth in the Southern mines. Benson had jumped an Indian's claim and the Judge had cut down on Benson with a double charge of buckshot. The Indian had struck several good pockets and had been run off each one by the white miners, until he had finally appealed to the Miner's Court for a spot he could mine without danger of losing if he again struck pay dirt.

The Miner's Court had considered the request long and judiciously and directed him to the top of a mountain overlooking Volcano, with their promise to protest his rights for any gold he took out of the claim. The miners knew the gold was all in the ravines and riverbeds but the Indian patiently ignored the laughs of the men in the saloons and started cutting the mountain down. He just kept moving dirt until he hit a vein that paid off in picture gold. The chastened Miner's Court held to their bargain and proclaimed that the claim belonged to the Indian and instructed the miners that he should be left alone.

Bob Benson disagreed with their ruling and ran the Indian off. So Judge Cain of the Miner's Court, took it upon himself to reprove Benson with his shotgun. Benson left that part of the country but whenever he and Cain met up there was a renewal of the feud. They had battled in many gold camps of the

Sierras. At Jeff's Corral, the judge had ended up with a bowie knife wound that ran from his neck to the thigh, and Bob Benson had four of his fingers and his left arm broken. Each time, Benson would disappear for a period to regain his strength and would then come hunting Judge Cain to finish it off.

This fight was being held in Apex and it looked bad for the Judge. He couldn't see, but his wild swings were burning holes through the heated air of the bar. Benson was putting on the finishing touches now. He'd lower his head and jerk Cain off balance, crashing the top of his hard Australian head in the judge's face until even the hardened miners flinched. The judge staggered against the bar and reached for support. His hand fell on a block of sulphur matches and he weakly struck them on the bar. They ignited and he groped until he could jam the fire into Benson's bushy hair. He made a frantic grab for the matches, but he missed and loosed all holds on the Judge.

The Judge calmly shook the coat loose and aimed a haymaker at the dancing Australian. The blow connected and smashed Benson into a corner. Able Cain brought up a bottle of red-eye from the bar and calmly poured it over the flaming tresses of his unconscious opponent, causing a pleasant blue flame.

The bartender rushed out with a pail of water and an angry growl, "Whatcha tryin' to do, burn the saloon down?" He extinguished the blaze and this revived a cursing Bob Benson.

JUDGE ABLE CAIN shook out his tail coat and through puffed lips, addressed the bartender. "Sorry to create such a mess in your otherwise immaculate establishment. As we say in court of law, the court legally places physical combat as the last resort in the settling of differences. In this case, I assure you that I was powerless to avoid the conflict. For most harms inflicted, our remedy is a judgement for damages, which I make here and now for my part in the wreckage. Please total the damages to your stock and establishment and I will gladly reimburse you for half. As there were two participants, you will have to collect the remainder from my opponent with the singed head."

"S'all right, Jedge. Thet was the best tangle I've seen since Tim O'Riley tried to chew off thet bar's ear." He hustled around behind the bar and lined up the tin cups. "Fust drink's on the house, gents." In the rush for the bar, Bob Benson had to move fast to get out the door before he was trampled.

Pike Peel, the Judge's partner, helped the Judge across the street to the *Donner Hotel*.

"Lay back on the bed, Jedge. I'm goin' to talk straight an' yore goin' to listen." Pike wrapped his spidery legs astraddle a chair and began.

"Yew know I spent a few years in Australia. It's a big country an' a wild country. It was settled by jailbirds out'a England." He held up a hand as the Judge started to speak. "Yeah, I know a lot of them wasn't murderers an' criminals; some of them were the best brains in England, political prisoners with the courage to speak their minds; but they was a lot of murderers too! Some of them married up with the natives, like Benson's pa did an' the kin got the bad parts of both races. Them natives are dangerous, sneaky critters. They kin foller the scent of animals acrossed solid rock; don't matter if'n the scent is days old. Onc't they git on yore trail, they kin foller yew from here to Saint Joe, even if'n yew could walk on air from here to thar! They kin crawl into a mountain lion's cave an' sleep thar without the lion ever knowin' it.

"Benson is jest a half-breed bushman with his Pa's build an' his Ma's meaness. He'll never leave off tryin' to git yew an' yew'll have to watch ever' move he makes. Yew whipped him this time, but he'll try at yew agin! Stomped out his brains thar today, when he was out, is what yew should'a done!"

The Judge smiled faintly and muttered. "The law says, when attacked,

man must use only enough force to repel the attack." He rolled over and Pike Peel furiously left the room.

Weeks passed, with no sign of Benson until early one morning, the Judge wandered down into the meadow below Apex for a rabbit hunt. He noticed a man sneaking through the tall grass and fired a warning shot. The skulker straightened and advanced toward the Judge. It was Benson, carrying a bent stick, but no gun.

"Got a gun, Benson?" asked the Judge.

"No I haven't got a gun Cain, but you have, so guess that won't stop you from using yours!"

"Get going Benson, I'll not shoot an unarmed man."

"I'm going Cain!" The Australian laughed and threw the bent stick.

SOME HOURS later, Pike found the Judge laying in a pool of blood. He watched the Judge's eyes refocus. "Of all the blasted idjits! Yew let him sneak up an' smack yew with a boomerang! I told yew he's as treacherous as a trapped coyote. He's been up in the saloon braggin' thet he kilt yew. Claims he kin go back home now thet yore out of his mind! An', it's jest as well, 'cause sooner or later he'd kill yew with one of them bushman's tricks. Any kid in Australia would'a knowed about thet boomerang!" Pike was shouting now.

"Law an' order! Law an' order! This country's too mean fer law. This rush brought in the worst cut-throats from all over the world. Chileans, wild indians, riff-raff from all the ports, all crammed into the territory of California. The Spanish prey on the whites, 'cause the whites took the country away from the Spanish. The Indians kill fer the same reason an' for any other reason. The Chileans kill an' steal from ever'body. They is Digger Indians thet will steal the foundations from underneath yore cabin. Them hounds from 'Frisco, ready to rob, swindle, ary man with an ounce in his pocket! The china boys fight wars between theirselves, an' ever'body in the state thinks no more of shootin' a chinaman than throwin' a rock at a stubborn mule!

"But, thet don't make no nevermind to yew! Yore jest a law abidin' fool. Yew'd give a rattler the fust bite an' then worry 'bout if'n he'd hurt his poor little fangs!"

The Judge raised weary eyes and gazed out over the mighty Sierra's. He pillowed his bloody head on his arms and his voice was soft. "We entered this land as the locusts entered. We came in droves to scourge the earth of gold. Our eyes are on the ground, searching for bits of yellow metal that might make us rich. Many have found the wealth in the mines, but many have died in the search.

"We slave in icy water and die in wild camps and canyons by the hundreds. We were peaceful at first but, then as you say, came the evil and we kill and rob. Miner's Courts meet and hang evildoers, but many of the men in the courts are as evil as the men they hang. Some of us have raised our eyes from the ground and seen the glory of the mountains, and the fertile land that will provide for us long after the gold is gone. We must tame this land so that others may live in peace. That is why we must have law. That is why we must settle our problems without bloodshed. We must use our brain which, after all, is man's strength. Now, help me up and bring that stick you call a boomerang!"

THE AUSTRALIAN had disappeared and when gold was discovered in Australia, the Judge heard reports on his activities. Many of the California miners made the rush to Australia. Some struck it rich, others drifted back and brought news and stories of Bob Benson.

He was mining with a gang of bushmen. The story was old in California. Contractors brought in gangs of chinamen and worked over the old diggings left by the restless Americans. It was cheap labor and much resented by the whites. It had been controlled by a head-tax law by the California government. Every oriental brought into the state was

charged a large tax, which in measure, held back the tide of slave labor from China. Judge Able Cain blessed the wide Pacific and forgot about Bob Benson.

It wasn't long before the peace of Apex and the rest of the mining districts was shattered by the news that Benson was bringing his two hundred bushmen to California. The latest miners arriving from Australia told of Benson's plan to bring them in under the head-tax law, because they were not orientals. The newsbringer also claimed that Benson was fitting up an old slave ship in Sidney and would arrive in 'Frisco in about two weeks. He was to settle below Apex as the 'Sidney Mining Company.'

The fury that ignited the miners flamed through the mountains and violence was on its way. There might be two hundred Australian bushmen arriving in the high Sierras, but the day following their arrival, there would be two hundred California graves filled. The miners came out of the canyons, leaving their prospect holes at the mercy of claim jumpers. Homesteaders saddled plowhorses and primed for war. Mountain men left trap lines high in the snow country and shuffled toward Apex. The news spread through California faster than redeye soaks into the felt of a dice table. This was a land of free men, not of slaves. If it was necessary to preserve the blessings of freedom, then blood would flow!

The dusty streets of the mountain town were jammed with grim pioneers. Death would enter with Bob Benson's bushmen. The redeye flowed and tempers edged.

Judge Able Cain stood alone on the balcony of the *Donner Hotel* and brooded. There must be some way to snip the fust before it reached the powder that would blow the

[*Turn Page*]

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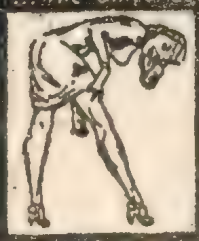

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fair name of Apex right off the map. He fondled the boomerang and wondered at the sharpness of its edge. Made of black oak...oak!

"Pike Peel! Pike!" shouted the judge. The men in the street looked up in surprise at the wild shout. Pike Peel came out of the saloon and pushed his way through the crowd to the Judge's room.

HALF AN HOUR later, Pike hurriedly saddled a horse and galloped from the town. The days passed and the miners wondered where he had gone but the Judge wouldn't talk. He urged the men to return to their claims and homes, but their tempers were hot and they turned vicious.

Cain could see that action would be necessary, when a mob burned out the Chinatown and drove the chinaboys deep into the hills. They were always the first to feel the wrath of the miners and were considered interlopers and rarely fought back against any indignities. So, he rang the fire bell for a meeting of the Miner's Court.

From the balcony, he addressed the assembly. "I know how you men feel about the Sidney Mining Company, but we should not cause bloodshed if it can be prevented."

"Thar'll be no bloodshed, Jedge!" shouted a man in the crowd. "We'll hang 'em all neat and not one drop of thar black blood will be spilt! Might have to set a few of them afire but we kin..." the crowd muttered assent so the Judge raised his voice again.

'All right, men. I don't want them here any more than you do. So let's move on to 'Frisco and prevent them from leaving the boat!"

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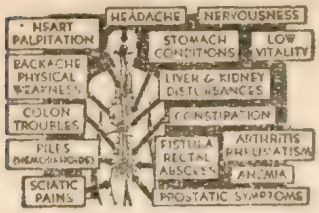

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"Yew go try it, Jedge!" shouted the court. "Thet's too far to travel. Let the blackboys do the walkin'! We'll do the hangin' when they git hyar!"

"That's a bargain, men. I'll leave for San Francisco tonight and try to prevent their landing."

The Miner's Court adjourned with laughter and jibes about the Judge's one man army but he saddled up and left that same night.

Several days later, Judge Able Cain arrived in San Francisco. He watched the water front and contacted the vigilantes at Fort Gunnybags. Finally, Bob Benson's ship entered the bay and the Judge went into action.

The bells of Fort Gunnybags rang and the vigilantes gathered. The citizens of San Francisco rushed toward the water front and gathered in an angry mob on the piers. If there was excitement brewing, the noisy citizens wanted to be present even if it might put them in a position of being shot. When Fort Gunnybags rang its bell, it was advance notice of a funeral and San Francisco was noted for its loyal attendance of wakes. History was being made and they all wanted a hand in the making.

The anchor was dropped and Bob Benson rowed ashore. He nonchalantly climbed the pier ladder and faced the crowd. "Never expected such a nice reception, gentlemen," he began just as Able Cain stepped forward and interrupted.

"This isn't a reception, Benson, but a committee to keep you from landing that slave labor. We..."

"Slave labor, Judge?" and Benson smiled softly. "These men are all relatives of mine. They are all stockholders in the Sidney Mining Company. We stopped in San Diego and received a permit to land in California for the purpose of establishing a mine in the Sierras. Right in your territory, Judge. The fair city of Apex!"

He reached into a pocket of his coat and brought out a legal document and, ignoring the Judge, passed it on to the head of the vigilantes.

"Looks like it's all in order,

[*Turn To Page* 127]

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Judge," he said, "guess we can't stop the landing. S'all legal."

The Australian sneered at the Judge and turned to the sailors in the boat. "Go back to the ship and start helping the 'passengers' ashore."

"Naow, jest a minute, mister," growled one of the sailors. "I ain't goin' back on thet plague ship...I'm gittin' off right naow!"

THE CROWD muttered and crowded nearer to gaze down at the sailor about to crawl up the ladder. His face was covered with blisters. His ears were swollen and his eyelids inflamed. Some of the blisters were broken and showed wet and angry spots. He had had trouble climbing the ladder because of his attempts to scratch several spots at the same time.

The crowd edged back as he reached the pier and growled; "I signed onto the Ship at San Diego jest four days ago an' naow I'm plagued! Ever'one of them blackfellers on thet ship is got the same thang an' if'n yew let them land it'll spread over the entire country!"

The crowd surged further back and the Judge drew his gun. The victim of the plague noticed and directed his speech toward Able. "Thar's the answer! Plug me mister, I'm gonna die with this awful disease, so yew'd be doin' me a favor!" His face twisted as he noticed the Judge's hesitancy.

"Yew'll be doin' me a favor! I was healthy an' strong when I boarded thet ship in San Diego, naow look at me! Plagued an' doomed to die!" He swept out his puffy hand. "Yew'll all be the same if'n yew let this boatload land. The fair state of California will be wiped clean an' the dead will rot in the streets of San Francisco. Shoot me mister!"

Judge Able Cain looked at the Vigilante Commander and caught his nod. The crowd sucked in a breath as the Judge raised his gun and fired a single shot. The sailor staggered, and toppled into the water!

"You!" shouted the Vigilante Commander to Bob Benson, "Get back to your ship and see that it sails within

[*Turn Page*]

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the hour! Johnson! muster your squad and stay on guard until that ship leaves the harbor! Haven! Muster your squad, equip them with fast horses and warn every port in California that this ship must be prevented from landing! Mr. Benson, I'll give you two minutes to give the orders for that death ship to weigh anchor!" He turned on his heel, before Benson could protest, and strode away with the spectators close behind.

Benson faced the Judge. "Cain, if I could put my finger on it, I'd say you engineered this deal! Those blackboys of mine were in perfect health when we arrived in San Diego, but they sure got somethin' now. I don't think this is the end of the matter. I'm going up town and get examined by a doctor and prove that I'm not infected and then, if you're not out of town, I'm going to come and find you and, when I do, I'm going to kill you!" The Australian hurried up the wharf.

The Judge stood and watched him, talking vehemently to the Commander and saw the Commander assign a two man guard and march him away.

The Bella Union was packed that night with spectators and, while the gambling was heavy and the drinking steady, there was an undercurrent of expectant waiting as they watched the Judge's tall figure, slumped nonchalantly against the polished bar as he sipped his whiskey. The men would glance from the Judge to the batwing doors in the same manner as a wedding party waiting for the bride to descend the stairs. The gambling palace had seen many fights, but this would be one to live in the memories of these hard bitten Californians for years to come. They knew of the wild melle's that Benson and the Judge had staged and the feeling was general that this would be the finale. The man who walked away from this fight would be the better man and the loser would, most likely, be dead.

THIS WAS California, the limit to the frontier. The bravest, toughest, and most wicked men in

the country had crowded to the edge of the mighty Pacific and could go no farther. They now clustered together and the sparks that flew from their meetings blazed like the northern lights. Now, two of the most renowned, were to meet and this the rest had to see!

The word had spread through the afternoon that Benson had been passed by the doctor as free from any plague and the Vigilante Commander had rescinded his order for Benson to leave.

The fight started with planned casualness. Benson walked through the door of the Bella Union, preceeded by a whisper of warning to the Judge. The gun in his hand was cocked as he entered the hall and the five shots that roared from the muzzle of the Navy Colt held in Benson's hand, shattered bottles and bored splintery holes in the bar but, the Judge had moved swiftly around the corner of the bar and emerged unhurt at the last shot. He was unruffled and calmly unbuckled his gun belt, laid it on the bar and spoke softly. "Benson, killing you won't be punishment enough for your meanness. I intend to break you in spirit and let the men in this gathering watch me do it!"

The Judge walked up to the Australian and the fight was on. They exchanged blows and the blood gushed from Able's nose, but it wasn't long until he had Benson bleeding heavily from the ears and spitting broken teeth. The men watched, breathing hoarsely, as the Judge beat the Australian to his knees. Benson didn't beg, but finally lay helpless on the floor. Able Cain shouted; "Bring a bucket of water!"

A swamper hurriedly appeared and the water was slopped into the beaten man's face. He revived and stared at the victor. He mouthed a vile curse and the Judge yanked him to his feet. He propped him into a chair and poured a burning glass of whiskey down Benson's throat and the onlookers flinched as the alcohol ran through the cuts in his broken lips.

Judge Able Cain grinned and

[*Turn Page*]

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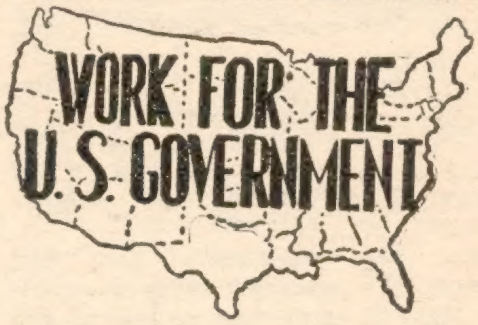

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spoke. "Thet's step number one. Now, get your bearings while I prepare step number two." A murmur from the crowd was heard but the Judge ignored it and called to the bartender. "Put one shell in each of those Navy Colts. Spin the cylinder so we won't know where the bullet is. Now Benson, take your gun and we'll each pull the trigger once. If the shell is in the chamber under the hammer of one of these guns, the other man will walk away."

Benson looked shaken, but accepted the gun and weakly aimed the barrel, he pulled the trigger and the dry click sounded like the whisper of death. Frantically, he snapped the trigger again but his aim was shaky and the live cartridge missed and shattered a bottle behind the bar.

The Judge smiled icily and slowly raised his revolver and the Australian ducked wildly behind a table. Rough hands hustled him out in the open and he shouted. "Don't shoot! I'm whipped!"

Able Cain watched him coldly and, raising the muzzle, fired in the air. "That," he said quietly, "is step number two." The Judge walked over to the crowd and pulled two flat bladed bowie knives from the spectators and continued, "This, is step number three!"

But the Australian had had enough. He screamed, through drooling lips, "I can't take no more! I'm leaving and you'll never see me again!" He rushed from the Bella Union and raced toward the waterfront.

AN HOUR later, the Judge stood on the wharf and watched the slave ship up-anchor and sail out toward the golden gate. He climbed down the ladder to look for the plague stricken man who had begged for death. Deep under the muddy dock, he found the wet, shivering, and cursing, Pike Peel!

The Judge stood, for five long minutes, while Pike unraveled a profane denunciation of the use of brains to prevent violence. "Stuff the poison oak down into the holds of the ship! Yew won't git it yoreself 'cause yew've bin runnin' the mountains fer years an' never got a blister off'n the poison oak bushes! Yeah! Yeah! I never got it off'n the stuff thet grows in the mountains but thet poison oak thet grows around San Diego is powerful stuff! I cut a rowboat full o' the stuff an' rowed out to the ship. I..."

Cain interupted the spluttering victim. "Didn't you wear gloves and grease your face like I told you?"

"Shore, but after I got through stuffin' the vile mess down the hold an' got ready to leave the ship, the blasted rowboat had drifted away an' I got caught by the Captain an' put to work shiftin' sail. Benson was drunk in his cabin the whole four days an' never come on deck until we arrived in San Franciso Bay. By then my face was so swelled up thet he never recognized me an' I was able to get in the boat thet rowed him ashore. They's only one thing worked out like yew planned an' thet is the blackfellows really got a bad case of poison oak. They tried to jump overboard an' like to wore holes in the ships side rubbin' theirselves an' tryin' to stop the itchin'!"

"That was good acting, Pike," the Judge grinned, "when you asked me to shoot you. The crowd thought you meant it. They scattered like rabbits when Benson left. We won't have any trouble sneaking out of town, now that it's dark. I'm sorry you had to wait so long under this stinking wharf but I had to whip Benson once and for all. I'm thankful we prevented the landing of Benson's slaves because the miners would have killed them sure if they ever got near the mountains. Yes sir! That was sure a good piece of acting...for a second, I thought you really meant me to shoot to kill!"

"Judge Able Cain, I cain't stand much more of this itchin' an' scratchin' an' if'n it don't ease up soon, I'm goin' to ask yew agin to shoot an', I'm gonna mean it!"

THE END

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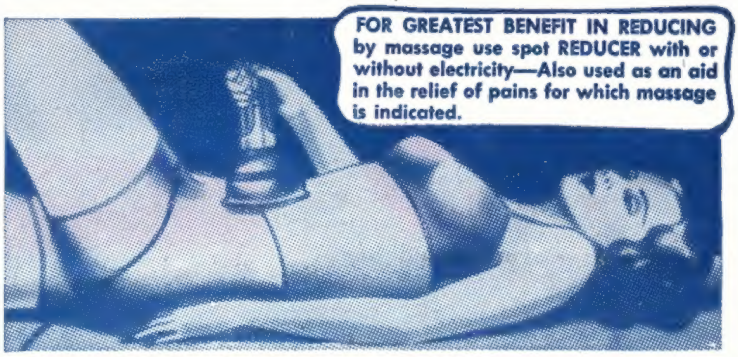

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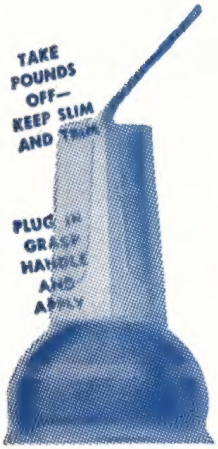

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